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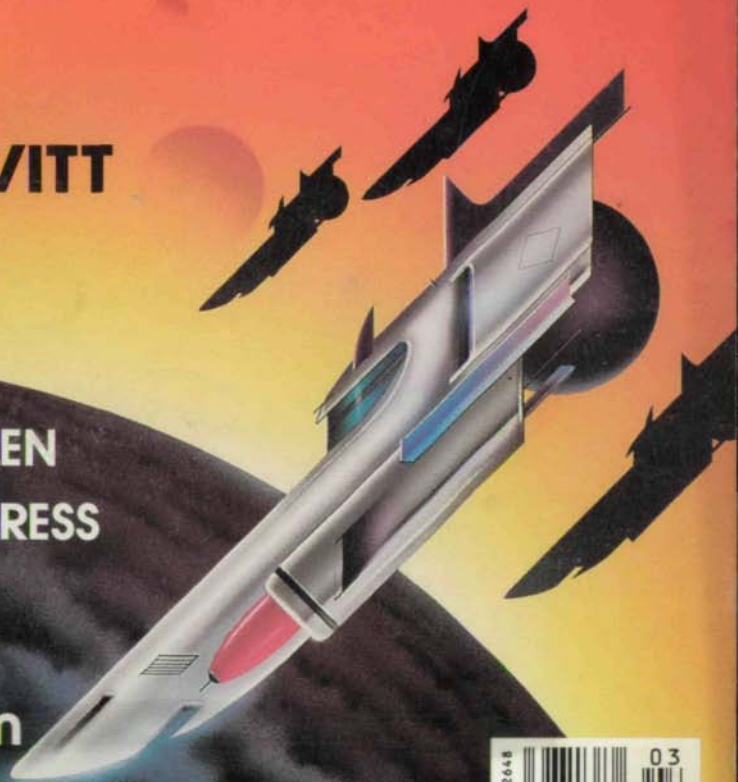

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March 1988
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# EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

## GLASNOST

Since Mr. Gorbachev became the most important person in the Soviet Union, "glasnost" has become an endlessly repeated Russian word in and out of season, even by people who do not know what it means.

Thus, I was asked recently to recite an introduction to a cable television showing of the motion picture *Enemy Mine,* in which I was asked to say that the Earthman hero and the reptilian alien "were forced to come to a 'glasnost' of their own."

Why not? They were annoyed with each other, like the United States and the Soviet Union, and yet they had to come to an accommodation. Isn't that "glasnost"? No, it's not. I quietly crossed out the Russian word "glasnost" and substituted the French word "detente."

"Glasnost" comes from a Russian word meaning "to publish," and it refers to a policy of "publishing" the facts, of being open about them, of being candid, of being truthful, of admitting the unpleasant and not hiding it. We can come pretty close if we translate "glasnost" as "candor," and let it go at that.

And why do I bring all this up? Because glasnost is the heart of science, and has been ever since it has existed. People are not supposed to be secret about their findings. They are supposed to report not only their findings so that the rest of the scientific world can be aware of them, but the methods they used to make those findings so that the rest of the scientific world can check those methods for themselves and see if they can make the same findings.

It is for that reason that the credit for a discovery goes not to the first person who makes it, but to the first person who publishes it, even when the actual discoverer is delayed in publication through no fault of his own. It is also for that reason that a discovery that involves some experimental procedure is not accepted until it is confirmed—that is, until some other person, at another time, in another place, using another instrument, repeats the procedure and makes the same finding.

Naturally, this is an ideal that is not always met. Sometimes a discovery is so closely tied to national security that secrecy must be maintained (as in the case of the building of the first nuclear bombs



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in the early 1940s). Sometimes it is tied to a profit-making aspect of a company where it is felt that even a patent is insufficient protection and where only dead secrecy is.

On a more personal note, a discovery is sometimes kept secret because the discoverer is uncertain of his results and wishes to work it out in greater detail or in other ways before publishing, lest he be made to seem a fool and badly damage his career.

In reverse, a scientist may rush into print or into a public announcement before he is *entirely* sure in order to safeguard his priority.

Ordinarily, however, you would expect a scientist to practice glasnost, and when someone fails to do so, and for no obvious reason, you have no choice but to suspect strongly that that someone is no scientist.

For instance, I received a letter, dated 27 April 1987, from a gentleman who wrote to me because he obviously considered me a well-known skeptic; that is, someone who had trouble believing things that were patently unbelievable. He referred to it as "this indefatigable skepticism," from which I gathered that he was a little impatient with it and that he wished I would show a little healthful gullibility.

Then he said, "A few years ago I was as convinced a skeptic as yourself."

That rang an alarm bell in my mind at once. I have lost count of

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the number of people who assure me they were once on my side. It means that they have come up with something that *converted* them to the other side against their will. I'm always getting that from creationists particularly, who tell me, "I was brought up as an evolutionist," in an attempt to have me think that when they were three years old, they were taught by their parents to put their hands together and say, "And Darwin bless mummy and daddy and . . ."

In any case, my correspondent went on to tell me what it was that converted him, to wit: "I was the victim of a paranormal incident of a dramatic nature whose details I won't bore you with."

The alarm bells were by now ringing loudly enough to deafen me. It's precisely the details of that incident that I want to hear. What makes him think the details would bore me?

Was the paranormal incident a dream? Did God come down from heaven and speak to him directly? Did he consult a fortune-teller? Did he hear voices in his head?

How am I going to judge the value of the paranormal incident of a dramatic nature if I know nothing about it? Obviously, in the absence of glasnost I cannot for a moment take him seriously.

In any case, he said that, as a result of this undescribed incident, he "was left with knowledge of specific future events."

One of these events is "an asteroid collision with the Earth."

He goes into some detail about the asteroid by saying, "The asteroid is fairly large—about 1700 feet in diameter."

Wow! Some quick figuring on scrap paper causes me to feel that the asteroid would weigh about two hundred and fifty million tons if it is rocky and over a billion tons if it is nickel-iron. No object of that mass has struck Earth at meteoric velocities in the last sixty-five million years, I think. This is an enormous catastrophe. What else has his paranormal incident told him?

Well, it tells him that it will "come to ground . . . in the vicinity of Winslow, Arizona where, I believe, a large meteorite impacted in the distant past." Yes, that earlier meteorite gouged out Meteor Crater which is half a mile across, but I don't think it was anywhere near as large as the one my friend is now predicting.

He further says that "the asteroid can be expected to come to Earth without causing any great loss of life in such a desert region," and now I begin to lose faith in the validity of his paranormal prescience. An asteroid that size is going to produce effects of a global nature, it seems to me, without much regard as to where it strikes.

But let's see if there is anything more he has to say about it?

Yes, the asteroid "will enter Earth's skies on the night of 10 May 1987 and come to ground on the 13th May."

A lot depends, of course, on exactly what my correspondent means



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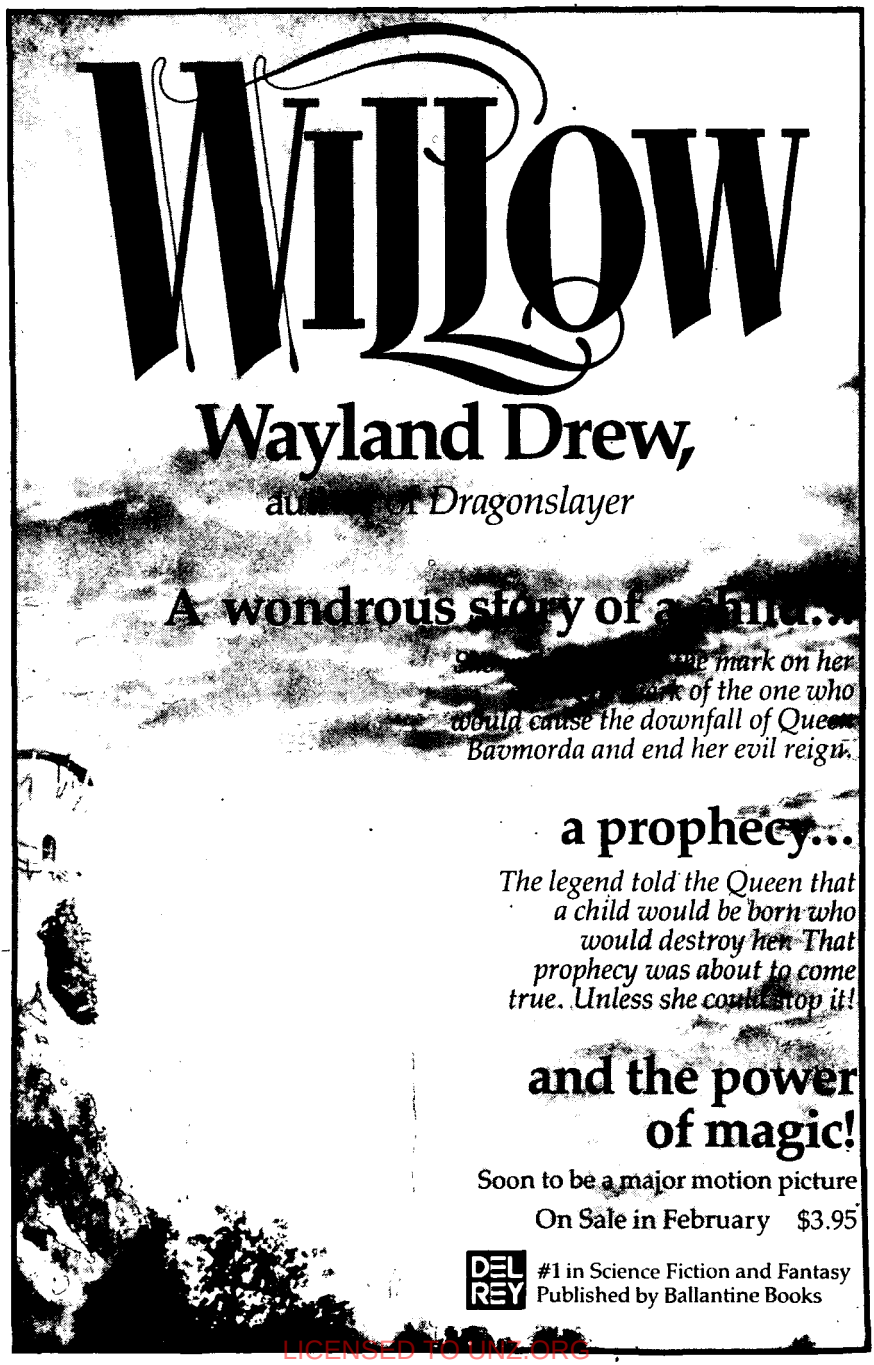
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by "enter Earth's skies," but it seems to me that the phrase makes no sense unless it means that it becomes visible in Earth's skies —in other words that it makes its appearance as a shooting star.

Very well, then. The maximum height at which an object is likely to become incandescent in the thin upper atmosphere is about eighty miles, and anything hitting the Earth from outer space is going to have a speed of anywhere from ten to forty miles per second.

If, then, the object is heading straight down, it's going to hit the ground eight seconds after making its first appearance, at the longest. If it strikes the atmosphere at a flat angle, but is deep enough into it to have reached incandescence, its orbit is going to decay quickly, and it's going to curve toward the ground. Even if it has time to make a revolution or two around the Earth before it "comes to ground," that will be, at most, a matter of a couple of hours.

Why, heck, it couldn't appear in the sky on the night of the 10th and come to ground only on the 13th, by any course of events I can easily imagine.

So at that point, I heaved a sigh of relief. Everything else was in the highest degree unlikely, but not *impossible,* and the catastrophe predicted would have been so great that I would have been uneasy at anything that wasn't impossible outright. The delay from the 10th to the 13th was impossible outright. This meant that although the letter was very neatly typed (far more than mine ever are) and was written with utter literacy and apparent reasonableness, I paid no attention to it whatever, and, on the morning of May 13, I woke up with no sense of apprehension at all.

And I was justified, for as you all know, no meteor of any noticeable size hit the Earth on that day.

My correspondent had a second prediction. There would be a major earthquake in the United States "within two months of the asteroid collision." That means between May 13 and July 13. He says that "it would be irresponsible to reveal the exact date and location" but it would "devastate a city and its surrounds [sic] with enormous casualties."

Presumably, this earthquake is a consequence of the asteroid, but why the Earth should brood about the collision so long before reacting is past my comprehension. Yet the connection would seem to be there. My correspondent says that the earthquake "only becomes relevant if the asteroid arrives."

How many letters like this I get! I only mention this one because it is so nearly rational compared to the rest. ●

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# LETTERS

Editor:

I found the July issue of *IAsfm* most thought provoking. First, I loved your editorial on romance. It provided much amusement and reminiscing in the case of *The Gods Themselves*. I got my hands on it through the Science Fiction Book Club many, many moons ago but I really never thought of it as a "heavy-duty" romance (à la Harlequin) but your use of it as an example in your editorial did make me think—yes, I muse, there was a love theme in there . . .

Next, the first letter in the "Letters" section really moved me. Fresh from an "A" in a graduate course in Roman history (from the Republic to the Empire), I felt compelled to answer in defense of all those galactic empire stories. My favorite readings in SF are short stories and then galactic empire stories. I love to read them and analyze the empire structure for weaknesses and plot revelations. Unfortunately, this ruins a great many of the *Star Trek* novels within the first fifty pages for me. However, as the wise-in-knowledge Dr. Asimov points out, the Sumerians even had their own "empire." It seems to me, an ardent student of both ancient history and SF, that many writers are right on the mark when they set up "empires." There has always been a ruling class of some sort throughout human civilization. The Greek historian Polybius, writing in the second century B.C., goes so far as to categorize these ruling groups. It all comes down to the same terms today. No, you say, not in America. Well, our government is along the same lines of that of the Roman Republic, our ruling class are the same bunch of people who are elected to office year after year. We also have our great families (the "Equestrians" and "Publicani" of the late Republic and the early Empire): the Du Ponts, the Vanderbilts, the Rockefellers, the Kennedys, etc. and ad nauseum. The letter writer's own example of the small planet being inhabited by settlers is open to another interpretation: suppose, over the years, it becomes more heavily settled. We're all aware of how population expansion can breed pressures. Next suppose that the original settlers are becoming a bit upset with the "upstart settlers" and demand more attention to themselves. It is easy to see how an old, established group rich in history and custom can demand to be the "keepers of the planet," to keep the power, prestige, and wealth to themselves. There are numerous examples, from which we apparently never learn not to repeat the



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same mistakes, throughout human history: those same Sumerians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Middle Ages, the continuing monarchies and democratic and totalitarian governments of today. Dr. Asimov does hold out hope of evolution. Myself, I'm an anarchist but I don't think there are enough decent humans on the planet to give anarchy a real go. If the human race does evolve this way, then the dear letter writer should have his or her way because we won't have a need for a ruling class, a House Atreides or a great galactic empire. Meanwhile, I'm gonna enjoy every empire story I get my hands on while they last.

In closing, I would like to offer a sad note of condolence on the loss of one of SF's finest writers, James Tiptree, Jr. Reading "Yanqui Doodle" was a sad reminder that I had also read of Alice Sheldon's tragic death in the newspaper that morning. It was an excellent piece that she unwittingly exited on and I found it to pack quite a punch. I will miss her greatly as I know many, many other fans will, too.

Margaret M. Crye
El Paso, TX

*My own feeling is that a Galactic Empire is clearly impossible unless there is faster-than-light communication. Since I don't think that we are very likely to develop such a thing, why have I written so many novels centering about Galactic Empires? Because it's fun.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Isaac,

One must presume Lucius Shepard ("The Sun Spider") writes specifically what you like for you, though I don't recall explicit or semi-explicit sex being an explicit part of your "manuscript guidelines."

I agree, he can write. But I don't agree that screwing around fairly regularly is any necessary part of the story—unless the editor thinks it is. Spinrad brings it to a head: his essay should have been sold to an Essex House successor since Essex House folded.

*IAsfm* seems to find a succession of editors, all with the same bent. That is why I address this letter to you, the Editorial Director. I wish you would permit this type of writing to be sold to the likes of Essex House so that I shouldn't be forced to buy it along with your good stuff.

Sincerely,

W. F. Poynter
Santa Rosa, CA

*I'm afraid I must repeat every once in a while that good stories are not so easy to come by that we would want to exclude any lightly. Society now permits freer sexual expression than was customary when I started in the field. Contemporary writers take advantage of this, as is their right, and we do not wish to penalize them for this, or to engage in censorship. As for my* personal *tastes, I think you'll find my own stories quite circumspect.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Doctor:

I received an unpleasant surprise this week—a reminder that my subscription to your magazine was expiring. Thinking this had



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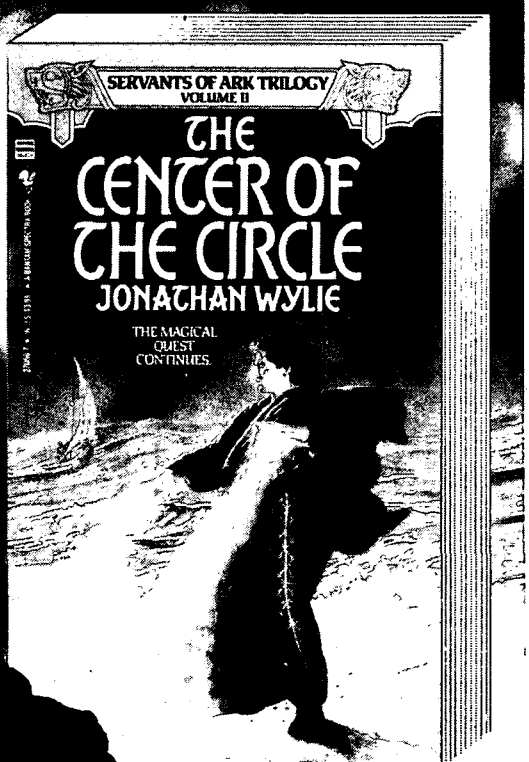


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already been handled by my always efficient wife, I informed her of pending divorce action if the situation was not remedied.

The purpose of this, my first fan letter, was my delight with a second story in the continuing adventures of Gilgamesh in Hell. Mr. Silverberg has come up with a fascinating milieu, and some very interesting choices for some of the inhabitants. Obviously, all politicians automatically qualify—liars all, if not worse. In view of recent developments in the search for heaven, maybe we should see some TV evangelists in future stories?

Please—give us more Gil!

Faithfully,

Paul Mewborn
Cape Coral, FL

*Divorce would be inappropriate. Penalize her by making her buy* two *subscriptions, donating one to some nearby hospital or other worthy institution.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Norman Spinrad seems to want to get me out of science fiction. Last fall in his *Asimov's* column he wrote a very imaginative fantasy about Le Guin's flight to the Eastern Literary Establishment, and in the last issue he announces that Le Guin is a "self-proclaimed apostate" from science fiction. I can only inquire: When did I proclaim my apostasy? Where? In what words? If he can quote them, I will eat them.

I write SF, and I write non-SF; therefore, I am a science-fiction writer *and* a non-science-fiction writer. Is this either impossible or reprehensible? In evidence of my double life: my last three magazine sales were to *Omni*, *The New Yorker*, and *Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Two out of three are SF; two out of three are high-pay. I take real pleasure in the *F&SF* sale because it has been a long time since I had a story that seemed right for Ed Ferman, who published my stuff way back when, and I have always liked his magazine.

Apostasy is not my bag. I write what I want to write, and Virginia sells it where she can. The only genre I can't imagine myself writing in is porn.

In the same article, Norman Spinrad asserts that Le Guin is "concerned with shaking off ... genre identification." This might be an honest misunderstanding of things I have said. I have stated in interviews that the "genrification" of fiction, though very useful in *selling* books in the short term, becomes in the hands of many literary critics and English departments a handy device for *permanently excluding* all genre fiction, including SF, from serious reviewing, from critical consideration, from literary grants and awards, from use in college courses, from being kept in print, etc. A hostile or careless reading, or reporting, of my statements on this subject might make my protest against negative genrification into an attempt to "shake off" my own "genre identification."

But, since genres do exist, and since I write in several of them, I identify myself with them. All through my career I have written and published in the genres of science fiction, fantasy, children's books, and young adult fiction, and



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at the same time have written and published ungenrified, "mainstream" fiction. I am therefore in an unusually vulnerable and unusually free position, where I can both feel, and fight, the snobbery, the ignorance, and the injustice of the exclusionists on both sides of the genre wall. I only wish none of us had to.

Ursula K. Le Guin
Portland, OR

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Oh, enough already.

I don't know where Norman Spinrad got the bee in his bonnet about Ursula K. Le Guin, but I wish he'd swat it and be done. It's a phantom bee, or anyway one from an alternate universe.

Science fiction doesn't have so many brilliant writers that we can afford to drum any out of the field because they sometimes publish in the "mainstream." Especially Le Guin, who would have to be drummed out kicking and screaming. In interviews and speeches where the subject comes up she invariably refers to herself as a science fiction writer. Her National Book Award speech was about being a science fiction writer. She was once, that I know of, quoted as saying that she was no longer writing SF. What she actually said was that *Always Coming Home* was not about *space travel.* She never said *Always Coming Home* was not SF. Of course it's SF. Its being nominated for non-genre awards, and ignored by Hugo and Nebula voters, does not change that fact. In ten years we're going to look back at 1985 and say, "That was the year *Always Coming Home* came out, and we didn't notice it." And we're going to be embarrassed.

No doubt Mr. Spinrad has rejected invitations to publish in *The New Yorker* in order to keep all his stories in SF magazines. I tip my bonnet to his superior purity. But I don't see any reason to attack Le Guin for publishing "out of genre." If *The New Yorker* responded to my short stories with anything other than rejection I would be delighted. Shall I turn in my SFWA card?

Doesn't the appearance of SF and fantasy stories by SF and fantasy writers in "non-genre" publications widen the field? Are we so insular that whenever one of our own gets wider notice we have to react with "Humph! I'll bet they think they're too good for us now"? Are we so insecure that every time a mainstream writer comes out with a "stunningly original" retread of a hoary old SF plot, we have to react with orgasmic gratitude? I think we deserve better than that. I think we *are* better than that.

Sincerely,

Vonda N. McIntyre
Seattle, WA

*My own feeling is that Le Guin and McIntyre make out an ironclad case. And, frankly, I am only too eager to accept Ms. Le Guin as a science fiction writer. She honors our field by identifying herself with it.*

*—Isaac Asimov*



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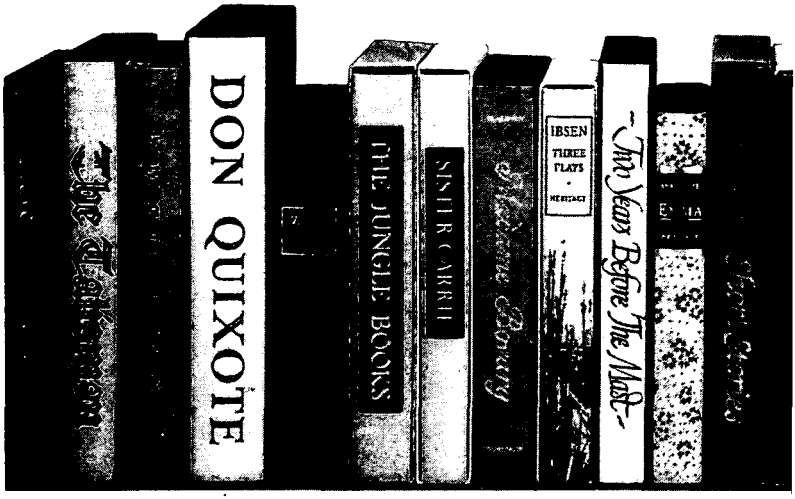


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# GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

Like the magazine world, role-playing games have discovered the virtue of "special interest" groups. While *Dungeons and Dragons*, with its dwarves and orcs, will probably go on forever (as new kids grow up and discover the game), most new role-playing games are tied to certain interests or depend upon a license for selling power.

The game that broke new ground, at least in a big, mass-market way, was, undoubtedly, *Paranoia* (West End Games). *Paranoia*'s humorous view of a paranoid, depersonalized future was a crazy mixture of *Brave New World*, *1984*, and Looney Tunes. Even if you didn't play *Paranoia*, the game books and modules were a gas to read. The West End people had fun making a big deal when SF author John M. Ford wrote one of their modules. But the quality of the writing has always been important to the *Paranoia* series.

Other, smaller companies have been extending the range of role playing. Last year's *Skyrealms of Jorune* is a carefully constructed and unique vision of the future. It featured beautiful illustrations that were classy and gave an aura of depth and reality to the strange creatures of the Skyrealms.

Now, from R. Talsorian Games Inc. (Box 2288, Aptos, CA 95001-2288) comes a game most of us have, in all likelihood, not been waiting for . . . *Teenagers from Outer Space*.

Described as a "very weird role-playing game," *TFOS* has, indeed, a strange premise. Imagine, it suggests, that several thousand teenagers from numerous distant worlds start to hang out on Earth ("the Fun Planet"). The aliens enroll in Earth schools, hit the shopping malls, and eat the same fast food junk our teenagers do.

(But they also can create a clone to stand in for them at history class while they go to the beach, or grow an extra arm to get an edge at volleyball.)

Designer Mike Pondsmith has created a rule book that's fun to read and a game that's inviting to play. He starts by explaining how to create "Your Very Own Teenager." Each teenager has eight statistics, most of them self explanatory. These are: Smarts, Bod, Relationship with Parents (this one tends to fluctuate quite a bit), Luck, Driving, Looks, and Cool. There's also something called the Bonk Index. Most teenagers feel

(Continued on page 176)



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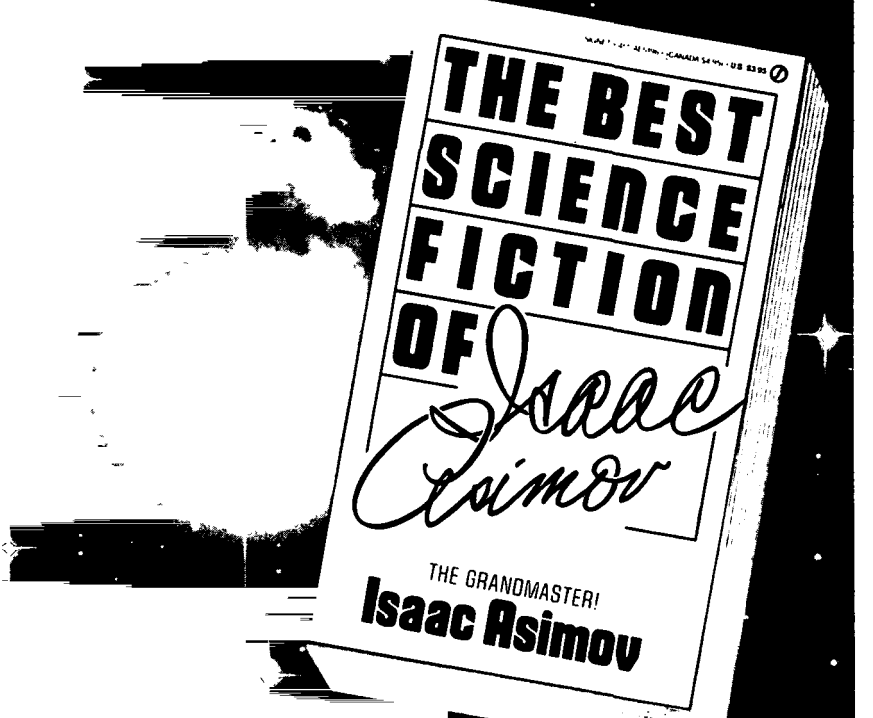


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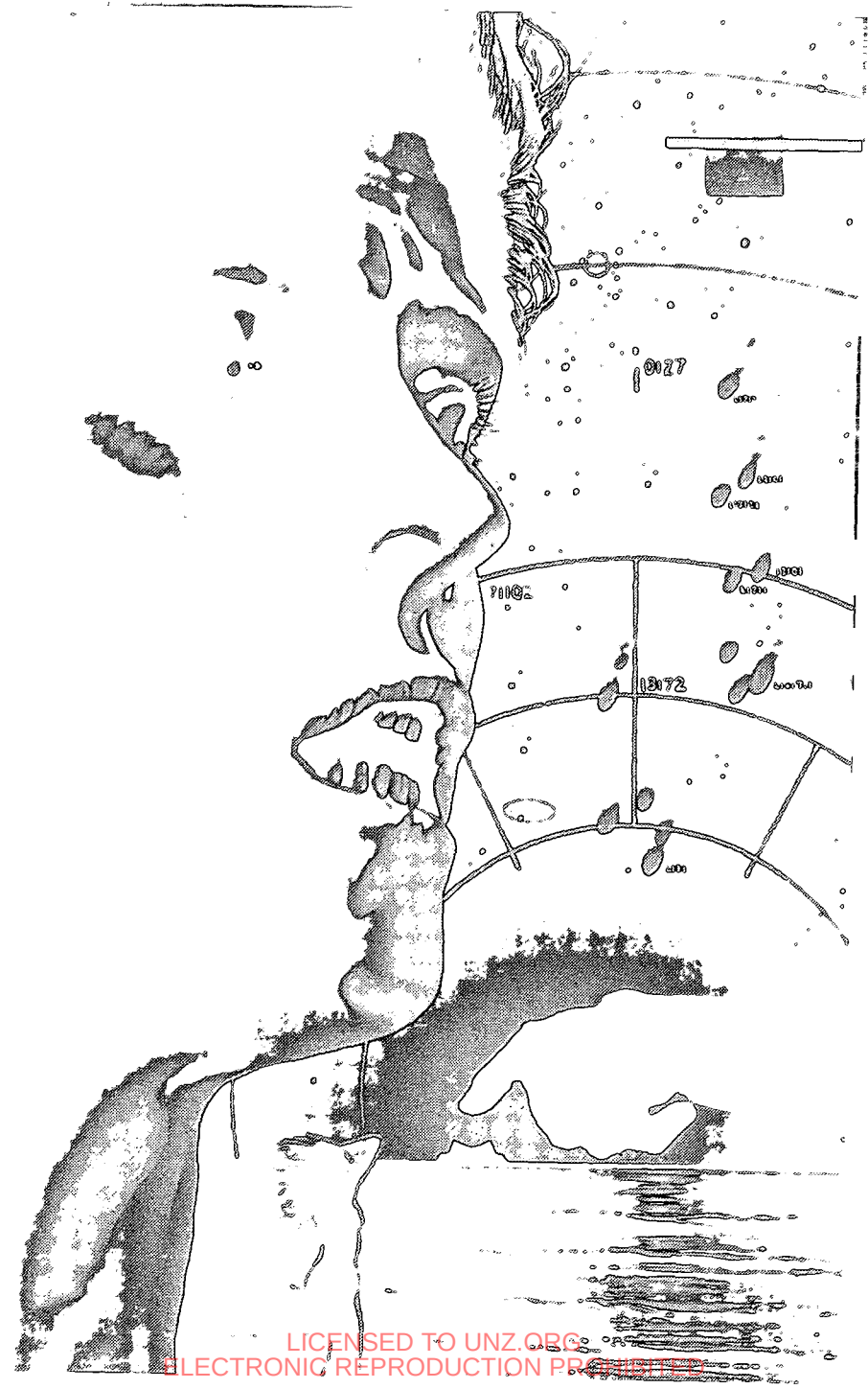


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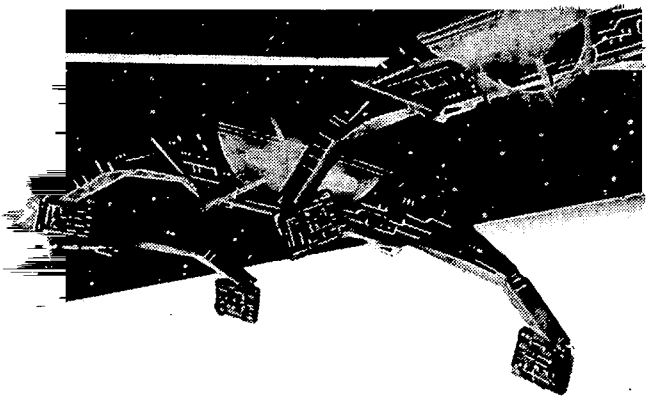

# SUNRISE

## by Jack McDevitt

Although the characters and circumstance are different, the following story is set in the same milieu as Jack McDevitt's "Dutchman" (February 1987). Mr. McDevitt tells us he loves the type of mystery which asks "What is really going on here?" and in "Sunrise" he is able to explore the scope that SF provides for this type of story.

art: Gary Freeman

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Ilyanda had always seemed haunted.

There is something that broods over its misty seas and broken archipelagos, that breathes within its continental forests. You can feel it in the curious ruins that may, or may not, have been left by men. Or in the pungent ozone of the thunderstorms that strike Point Edward each night with a clocklike regularity that no one has yet explained. It is no accident that so many modern writers of supernatural fiction have set their stories on Ilyanda, beneath its cluster of brilliant white rings and racing moons.

To the planet's several thousand inhabitants, most of whom live at Point Edward on the northern tip of the smallest of that world's three continents, such notions are exaggerated. But to those of us who have arrived from more mundane locations, it is a place of fragile beauty, of voices not quite heard, of dark rivers draining the unknown.

I was never more aware of its supernal qualities than during the weeks following Gage's death. Against the advice of friends, I took the *Meredith* to sea, determined in the perverse way of people at such a time to touch once again a few of the things we'd shared in our first year, thereby sharpening the knife-edge of grief. And if, in some indefinable way, I expected to recapture a part of those lost days, it might have been from a sense that, in those phantom oceans, all things seemed possible.

I sailed into the southern hemisphere, and quickly lost myself among the Ten Thousand Islands.

It didn't help, of course. I curved round familiar coasts and anchored off rock formations that, silhouetted against other nights, had resembled freedivers and pensive women. But the images were gone now, driven to sea by relentless tides. I slept one evening on a sacrificial slab in a ruined temple that, on at least one occasion I could remember, had been put to far better use.

In the end, I realized he was not out there.

Point Edward is visible at sea from an extraordinary distance. Visitors to Ilyanda are struck by the phenomenon, and are usually told that the atmosphere possesses unusual reflective qualities. Climatologists maintain that the effect is due to an excess of water vapor. But I can tell you what it is: Point Edward is the only major source of artificial light in a world of dark seas and black coasts. In a sense, it is visible all over the planet.

On that last day at sea, I saw it in the eastern sky almost immediately after sundown. I adjusted my course a few degrees to port, and ran before the wind. The water was loud against the prow, and, I think, during those hours, I began to come to terms with my life. The broad avenues and glittering homes that commanded the series of ridges dominating the coastline gradually separated themselves from each other. And I



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poured myself a generous glass of brissie and raised a toast to the old town.

The constellations floated on black water, and the radio below decks murmured softly, a newscast, something about the Ashiyyur. Like my former life, the war with the Mutes was very far away, out in a nebula across the Arm somewhere. It was hard to believe, in the peaceful climate of Ilyanda, that people—well, humans and the only other technological creatures we'd found—were actually killing one another.

A bell clanged solemnly against the dull roar of the surf. A white wake spread out behind the *Meredith*, and the sails filled with the night.

Point Edward had been built on the site of an ancient volcano. The cone, which had collapsed below the surrounding rock into the sea, provided an ideal harbor. A cruise along the coast, however, would quickly demonstrate there was no other place to land. The chain of peaks and escarpments ran almost the entire length of the continent. South of the city, they seemed preternaturally high, their snowcapped pinnacles lost in cumulus.

I approached from the north, steering under the security lights of the Marine Bank on Dixon Ridge and the Steel Mall, past the serene columns and arches of the municipal complex, and the hanging gardens of the University of Ilyanda. The air was cool and I felt good for the first time in months. But as I drew near the city, as the boulevards widened, and the lighted marquees became legible (I could see that the California holo *Flashpoint* had arrived at the Blackwood), a sense of apprehension stole over me. The wind and the waves grew very loud, and nothing moved in the channel, or along the waterfront. It was of course late, lacking only a bit more than an hour before midnight. Yet, there should have been something in the harbor, a skiff, a late steamer full of tourists, a patrol craft.

Something.

I tied up to my pier at the foot of Barbara Park. Yellow lights dangled over the planking, and the place looked bright and cheerful. It was good to be home.

I strolled casually toward the street, enjoying the loud clack of the boards underfoot. The boathouse was dark. I ducked behind it, came out on Seaway Boulevard, and hurried across against the traffic light. A large banner strung over the storefront window of Harbor Appliances announced an autumn sale. One of the appliances, a cleaner, lit up, started its routine, and shut off again as I passed. Across the street, a bank databoard flashed the weather: showers (of course), ending toward morning, a high of 19, and a low of 16. Another pleasant day coming up.



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Control signals blinked and clicked. It had rained earlier: the streets were slick with water. They were also empty.

I was only a block from the Edwardian, our major hotel. Like many of the older structures in town, it was Toxicon Gothic. But it towered over the others, a colossus of ornate porticos and gray towers, of blunt arches and step-down galleries. Yellow light spilled from two cupolas atop the gambrel roof. (I had a few pleasant recollections from this place too, but they all predated my marriage.)

The Edwardian was used extensively by tourists, and its Skyway Room also served as a popular rendezvous for revelers seven nights a week. The sidewalks should have been jammed. Where the hell was everybody?

There was something else. I could see the main library about halfway up a sharp rise west of town. It's a sleek modern place, designed by Orwell Mason, and done in late Terran. Set amid a scattering of fountains and pools, its lines suggest a fourth dimension, an effect emphasized by nighttime illumination. A massive boulder, which is supposed to have been deposited by the ice fifteen thousand years ago, guards the main approach.

It was almost midnight.

The lamps should have been dimmed to the soft multi-colored ambience of the fountains, and the topological illusion consequently diminished. But the place was ablaze with light.

I looked at my watch again.

Only a handful of vehicles were parked on the library grounds. No movement was detectable, either inside or outside the building.

I was standing in the middle of Seaway Boulevard. It's a broad thoroughfare, the central artery, really, in Point Edward. To the north, it rises in a near straight line across a series of escarpments; to the south, it proceeds about another half-kilometer to Barracut Circle, the heart of the shopping district. Nowhere in all that stretch of blinking traffic signals and overhead arcs could I see a single moving car.

Or a pedestrian.

Even Tracy Park, usually full of moonstruck couples from the University, was deserted.

A sudden gust blew up a light chop, and drove a scattering of leaves and debris against the shops on the west side of the boulevard.

No one's ever accused me of having an active imagination, but I stood puzzled out there, listening to the city: the wind and the rain and the buoys and the water sucking at the piers and the suddenly audible hum of power beneath the pavement and the distant banging of a door swinging on its hinges and the Carolian beat of the automated electronic piano in the Edwardian. Something walked through it all on invisible feet.

I hurried into the shadows of the shops that lined the street. The



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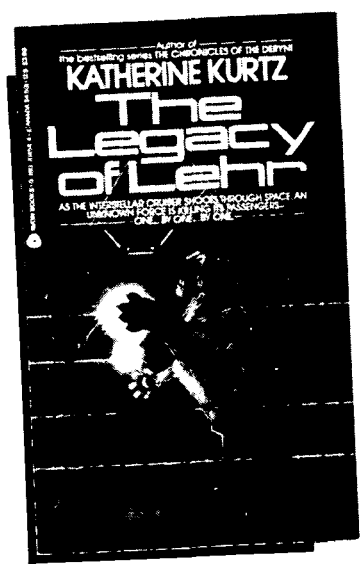


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needlepoint towers, the sequestered storefronts, the classical statuary in the parks: I had never noticed before, but they resembled the ruins I'd visited in the southern hemisphere. It was not difficult to imagine a far traveler strolling these weed-choked avenues, feeling the press of the centuries, and the eyes of the long dead, nodding knowingly at primitive architectural styles, and retreating at last, not without a measure of relief, to a boat moored in the harbor.

Well, there you are. I was standing in front of the Surf & Sand with my imagination running wild when the lights went out.

It was like somebody threw a switch.

My first impression was that the entire city had been plunged into darkness. But that wasn't quite the case: traffic signals still worked, streetlamps still burned, and Cory's Health Club was illuminated by security lights. In the opposite direction, the Edwardian showed no change whatever. But beyond it lay rows of darkened storefronts, and a few commercial establishments. Across the street, Captain Culpepper's Waterfront Restaurant, and the garden supply shop on the corner of Seaway and Delinor, also retained some lights. Most of the great bowl of the city spread out beyond and below that intersection: thousands of homes were dark. I couldn't be certain, but I would have sworn they had all, *all*, been brightly lit a moment before. The library had also vanished into the general gloom.

Along the piers, some of the strings of bulbs glowed brightly. Others had died.

I tried to imagine a sequence of events that would account for it. Had there been some sort of power breakdown, surely the failure would have occurred in a discernible pattern: blackout here, normal conditions there. But that wasn't the case. *My God, that wasn't the case.* Power interruption appeared to be purely arbitrary across the city. Had I not experienced the simultaneous shutdown, I would not have been aware anything unusual had happened. Point Edward looked more or less as it might be expected to look at midnight.

And I wondered what sort of hand had thrown the switch.

I started to walk again, trying to tread gently, to muffle my footsteps. Past the Keynote ("Musical Groups for all Occasions"), the Male Body (a clothing shop), Monny's Appliance Rental, and a three-story posh apartment complex. No light in any of them.

I stopped at the apartment building and pressed all the signals. Nothing happened, no one asked who was there, no light came on.

The Blue Lantern, where I usually ate lunch when I was downtown, looked open for business. Its sign blinked on and off. The window neons burned cheerfully, and a bright yellow glow crept over the transom. The



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tables were set with silverware, and soft music drifted into the street. But the candles were all out.

The door was bolted.

I pulled my jacket tightly about my shoulders and, for the second time that night, resisted the tug of fear.

The war, I thought. Somehow, it had to be the war.

But that made no sense. The war was very far, and Ilyanda wasn't even part of it. Anyhow, why would the Mutes spirit away twenty thousand people?

I crossed the street and hurried into the parking area. The lot was dark, and a heavy mist seemed to be setting in. I had to grope around a bit because I'd forgotten where I'd left the car. I found it finally after going full circle back to my starting point. It embarrasses me now to admit it, but I felt a hell of a lot better after I was inside, with the hatches locked. I switched on the radio.

Lach Keenan's familiar voice filled the interior, reassuringly discussing a proposed school bond issue with someone who had called in. Point Edward's other three stations were still on the air: everything seemed normal.

I waited for Keenan to give his code, and then punched it into the telecom. I got the tones that indicated a connection had been made, and then Keenan's voice.

"Hello," it said. "Thanks for calling *Late Night*. We're not broadcasting live this evening, but we'd be happy to hear from you next time. Good night."

I cruised slowly through the downtown area, and turned out University. The streets widened, and the commercial area gave way to shadowy stone houses with rock gardens and fountains. Gymnasiums and pools and community centers stood stark and empty. Out near Brandenthorn, on the edge of town, a black dog stopped in the middle of the street, looked at me, and walked on.

After a while, I turned around and, feeling less uncomfortable downtown, drove back to the waterfront. I stopped behind the Marine Bank. The tide surged over the rocks and threw spray up onto the windshield. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something was creeping up on me. And yes, I felt ridiculous.

Eventually, I went back to the Edwardian.

The lobby was lighted, but no hosts walked among the potted fronds. No guests gathered before the gleaming clerks, whose screens all read *Good evening—May I help you?* in friendly gold script. In the Iron Pilot, I poured myself a drink. I don't remember what it was.

Distant thunder rumbled.



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I walked into a commbooth, inserted my card, and punched in Quim Bordley's code. Quim was an old friend, an antique collector who I knew would be unhappy receiving a call at such an hour. But he stayed home a lot, and enough was enough.

No one answered.

Aias Weinstein, a sound expert at the Gallery, didn't answer.

The spaceport sequnty office, where Gage had worked didn't answer.

The police didn't answer.

I slumped against the back of the booth. My heart pounded, and the fronds and chairs and counters and clerks grew blurred and unreal. At the far end of the lobby, at the travel desk, an electronic sign urged patrons to charter a Blue Line cruise.

I consulted the directory for Albemarle, a small mining settlement across the continent, and tried the police there. A voice replied!

"Good evening," it said. "You have reached the police department. All operators are busy at the moment. Please remain on your link, and we will be right with you. If this is an emergency, enter the Q code for your area."

"Yes," I whispered into the receiver, cautious lest I be overheard. "My God; this is an emergency, but I don't have a Q code, not for Albemarle, I don't live there."

After a while the recording repeated.

I rode through the silent streets. At twenty-seven minutes past midnight, right on schedule, the storm struck and filled the night with water and electricity. I should have stopped, but I felt safer on the move.

Lights were on at Point Edward Hospital. I hurried through the emergency entrance, down long polished corridors. The beds were crumpled, sheets and blankets tossed aside. Most of the diagnostics were on. They had left in a hurry.

At Coastal Rescue, boats were tied to their moorings, and skimmers stood on their pads. I broke into the communication center, which is supposed to be manned twenty-seven hours a day, and sat down at the radio. There were weather reports from the satellites, and an update on maritime schedules. All recorded. Then I picked up a conversation:

"—Recommend approach at zero two seven mark three," a female voice said. "Navigation configuration Homer Four. Charlie, there is no traffic in your area. You are clear to proceed."

"Will comply," said Charlie. "It's good to be back." He sounded tired.

"We're looking at a quick turn-around on the surface flight, Charlie. The manifest shows eleven passengers for Richardson. How about you and your crew?"



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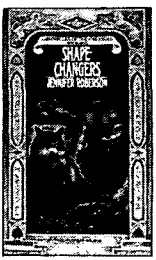

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"Janet's going down. She says she has a brother at the Point." He snickered.

"Okay. Have them report to Fourteen. Lower level. We're running a little late."

It was clearly a communication between the Station and a ship. Richardson, of course, is the spaceport outside Point Edward.

I tried to call them, but the transmitter might not have had its directionals lined up, or something. At least, that's what I thought then. Anyhow, somewhat relieved, I went back to the car. I considered going home. But in the end, I continued past my apartment and turned out the old Burnfield Road. When the shuttle came down I would be standing in the terminal.

There are two scheduled flights each day from the Station: one arrives in the late afternoon. The other is a redeye special that comes in at 0410, bringing tourists or businessmen mostly from the Golden Horn. For them it is still early evening.

The Captain William E. Richardson Spaceport is located twenty-two kilometers southwest of Point Edward. Since most of the traffic between the facility and the city is by skimmer, the surface road had been allowed to deteriorate. It is a rough ride.

As soon as I got up over Highgate, which is the ridge that encloses and supports most of Point Edward, I could see the Blue Tower. It was then the tallest artificial structure on the planet, an obelisk of stone and glass, not unlike the starships that send their passengers and cargo through her bays and docks.

A steady stream of water, silver and misted in the moonlight, plunged from a rooftop conduit and spumed into a marble pool at the base of the building.

Richardson is a combined facility, serving both civilian and naval operations. Probably two-thirds of it, in those troubled times, was reserved for the Navy.

The road rose and fell, curved past dark farmhouses and through satellite towns and across fields of ripening wheat. A new radio host was taking calls, people chattering about the visit to Ilyanda by Christopher Sim and his Dellacondan volunteers, and complaining about a construction project in the Maraclova area.

I glanced at my watch. The shuttle was about an hour and a half away.

Clusters of black clouds floated low on the horizon. They, and the stark landscape, were silvered by the rings, which were close to full phase. In the tense and awful silence of that night, the ancient gods of Ilyanda seemed close at hand.

In the darkness of the car, I managed a smile.



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Early settlers around Point Edward had quickly come to believe in the literal existence of supernatural beings. The literature was rife with forest devils and phantoms and things of questionable deity.

I've read somewhere that superstition takes hold, even in a technological society, wherever the total human population on a planetary surface fails, within a given time, to rise above a minimum figure. It's easy to believe.

The towns along the route showed no sign of life. Eberville, Kaisson, Walhalla: all looked deserted.

At Walhalla, I rounded a curve too fast, saw a shadow lying across the road, and bounced into a ditch. The cocoon exploded in my face, I hit myself in the jaw, and the car wound up in a foot of water.

I sat breathing hard for a few moments, and then discovered that the retractor was damaged. I had to climb out from under the cocoon, detach it manually, and drag it out of the front seat.

The thing I'd hit was a city carrier. It lay half off the highway, nosed into some trees, its hood raised, all doors open. Big and ungainly, it was not designed for country roads. It should have been making stops along Seaway Boulevard. But it had been pressed into service to take people out to Richardson. Why?

I looked again at the dismal sky, and I think I let go a little.

A half-hour later, cold, wet, desperate, I drove beneath Moonlock Gate into the spaceport. The wind blew through the small complex, and a service monorail vehicle edged out of one of the hangars. But no crewman was visible.

As I approached the Blue Tower, carriers, jitneys, and trucks became more numerous until they choked the road. Outside the Currency Exchange there'd been a major accident. Several vehicles were crushed and scorched, and the pavement had caved in. A wrecked skimmer had been pulled out of the tangle onto the lawn in an effort to clear the road. Behind the skimmer lay a freshly dug clay mound almost as long as the aircraft itself. Someone had pounded a wooden cross onto its topmost point.

When I could go no further, I turned the car around so I could get out in a hurry if I had to, and walked. The aprons were jammed with dropped luggage and overturned dollies. Food wrappers, beverage containers, and print editions of periodicals were driven against the dead convoy by occasional gusts.

There were bloodstains on one of the entry doors.

I went inside, into the cavernous reception area. (It had never before looked so large.) And I wandered past the ticket dispensers, and the



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souvenir shops and art marts, and the vehicle rental counters and security checkpoints.

Through the crystal walls, I could watch the monorail moving deliberately and mechanically among the service structures.

I went up to the second deck, took a seat on the observation terrace, checked the time, and settled in for the arrival of the shuttle.

Against the overcast sky, the redeye would not be visible much before it settled into its cradle. It would come in on silent magnetics, materializing out of the mist, black shell slick with rain, an apparition, a thing (on this spectral night) of slippery reality.

What cargo would it carry for Point Edward?

I turned on a holo, and watched two middle-aged men form and plunge into a heated discussion, though I cannot remember, and may never have been aware of, the nature of their disagreement. At least it was noise. But if it was at first reassuring, I quickly began to wonder whether it might draw attention. In the end, although I castigated myself for my fears, I shut it off, and found a seat sheltered from view.

I drank several cups of coffee from a mall restaurant.

And waited.

The scheduled time of arrival came and went. The heavy gray clouds were unbroken.

Fat round blobs of water ran down the windows.

After all these years, the growing terror of those moments remains bright. I knew, maybe somehow had known all along, that they would not come. That despite all the talk on the circuits, they would not come!

I stole away finally, beaten. It's curious how quickly one adapts: I had reached a state at which the deserted corridors, the silent shops, the utter emptiness of the sprawling complex and the city beyond, seemed the natural order of things. It was a natural order into which I intruded. Consequently, I did not stroll down the main passageways, broadcasting my presence. Nor did I consider using the public address system.

I had never before seen the security office empty. It was locked, and I had to break a glass panel to get in. One of the monitors was running, presenting views of loading areas, passageways, retailers.

Gage's desk was in an adjoining office. Nothing looked different from the days when he'd been here, other than the copy of the plaque which they'd given me when he died. It hung near the door, and it helped a little.

I collapsed onto a small couch in the corner of the office and tried to sleep. But I was afraid to close my eyes. So I sat there for almost an hour, watching the door, listening for sounds deep in the heart of the building.



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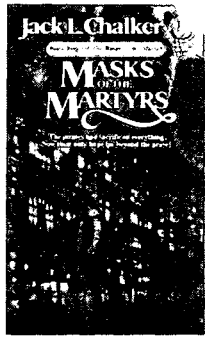


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And of course hearing them, knowing all along they were not really there.

I remembered there was a laser pistol in the desk. It was locked and I had to pry it open, but the weapon was still there. I lifted it out, hefting it, feeling better for its cool metallic balance. I checked to see that it was charged. There was no convenient place to carry it, and I ended by pushing it down into my boot.

The communication center was located near the top of the Blue Tower. I took an elevator up until I could see the ocean, got out and walked through suites of offices, entered the operations section, and used the weapon to cut through a heavy door marked KEEP OUT. I'd been back there once or twice before, on guided tours for family members.

The transmitter had been left on.

Something was going out. I put it on the speaker. A short burst of bleeps filled the room. Telemetry! The spaceport was transmitting telemetry!

And that made no sense. I went back outside and looked to see if there were moving lights somewhere, something going up or coming down. But the gray heavy clouds were unbroken. At ground level, a light mist had begun to creep across the grass.

I went to an open channel and locked in on the Station. "Hello," I said. "This is Richardson. Where the hell is everybody?"

There was no answer.

I'm not sure precisely when I realized I wasn't alone. A footstep somewhere, perhaps. The sound of running water, possibly a subtle swirling of air currents. But I was suddenly alert, and conscious of my own breathing.

My first impulse was to get out of the building. To get back to the car, and maybe back to the boat. But I held on, feeling the sweat trickle down my ribs.

I moved through the offices one by one, conscious of the weapon in my boot, but deliberately keeping my hands away from it. I was close to panic.

I'd stopped in a conference room dominated by a sculpted freediver. A holograph unit which someone had neglected to turn off blinked sporadically at the head of a carved table. A half-dozen chairs were in some disorder, and several abandoned coffee cups and light pads were scattered about. One would have thought the meeting had recently adjourned, and that the conferees would shortly return.

I activated the holo and some of the light pads. They'd been discussing motivational techniques.

As I turned away, somewhere, far off, glass shattered!



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It was a sudden sharp report. Echoes rattled through the room, short pulses that gradually lengthened into each other, merged with the barely audible hum of power in the walls, and subsided at last into a petulant whisper.

Somewhere above. In the Tower Room, the rooftop restaurant.

I rode the elevator up one floor to the penthouse, stepped out into the gray night and walked quickly across an open patio.

In the fog, the Tower Room was little more than a gloomy presence: yellow-smeared round crossbarred windows punched into a shadowy stone exterior; rock columns supporting an arched doorway; a waterwheel; and an antique brass menu board whose lighting no longer worked.

Soft music leaked through the doors. I pulled one partway open and peered in at an interior illuminated by computerized candles flickering in smoked jars. The Tower Room in those days looked, and felt, like a sunken grotto. It was a hive of rocky vaults and dens, divided by watercourses, salad dispensers, mock boulders and shafts, and a long polished bar. Blue and white light sparkled against sandstone and silverware. Crystal streams poured from the mouths of stone nymphs and raced through narrow channels between rough-hewn bridges. Possibly, in another time, it might have been a relatively pedestrian place, one more restaurant in which the clientele and conversation were too heavy to sustain an architect's illusion. But on that evening, in the stillness that gripped the Blue Tower, the empty tables retreated into a void, until the glimmering lights in the smoked jars burned with the steady radiance of stars.

It was sufficiently cool that I had to pull my jacket about my shoulders. I wondered whether the heating system had given out.

I crossed a bridge, proceeded along the bar, and stopped to survey the lower level. Everything was neatly arranged, chairs in place, silver laid out on red cloth napkins, condiments and sauce bottles stacked side by side on the tables.

I could feel tears coming. I hooked my foot around a chair, dragged it away from the table, and sank into it.

There was an answering clatter, and a voice: "Who's there?"

I froze.

Footsteps. In the back somewhere. And then a man in a uniform.

"Hello," he called cheerfully. "Are you all right?"

I shook my head uncertainly. "Of course," I said. "What's going on? Where is everybody?"

"I'm back near the window," he said, turning away from me. "Have to stay there." He paused to be sure I was following, and then retreated the way he'd come.



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His clothing was strange, but not unfamiliar. By the time I rejoined him, I'd placed it: it was the light and dark blue uniform of the Confederacy, the small group of frontier allies waging war against the Mutes.

He'd piled his table high with electronic equipment. A tangle of cables joined two or three computers, a bank of monitors, a generator, and God knew what else. He stood over it, a headphone clasped to one ear, apparently absorbed in the displays: schematics, trace scans, columns of digits and symbols.

He glanced in my direction without quite seeing me, pointed to a bottle of dark wine, produced a glass, and gestured for me to help myself. Then he smiled at something he had seen, laid the headset on the table, and dropped into a chair. "I'm Matt Olander," he said. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He was middle-aged, a thin blade of a man whose gray skin almost matched the color of the walls, marking him as an off-worlder. "I don't think I understand the question," I said.

"Why didn't you leave with everyone else?" He watched me intently, and I guess he saw that I was puzzled, and then *he* started to look puzzled. "They took everybody out," he said.

"*Who*?" I demanded. My voice went off the edge of the register. "*Who* took everybody *where*?"

He reacted as if it was a dumb question and reached for the bottle. "I guess we couldn't really expect to get one hundred percent. Where were you? In a mine somewhere? Out in the hills with no commlink?"

I told him and he sighed in a way that suggested I had committed an indiscretion. His uniform was open at the throat, and a light jacket that must have been nonregulation protected him from the chill. His hair was thin, and his features suggested more of the tradesman than the warrior. His voice turned soft. "What's your name?"

"Lee," I said. "Kindrel Lee."

"Well, Kindrel, we spent most of these two weeks evacuating Ilyanda. The last of them went up to the Station during the late morning yesterday. Far as I know, you and I are all that's left."

His interest wandered back to the monitor.

"Why?" I asked. I was feeling a mixture of relief and fear.

His expression wished me away. After a moment, he touched his keyboard. "I'll show you," he said.

One of the screens—I had to move the bottle to get a good look—dissolved to a concentric ring display, across which eight or nine trace lights blinked. "Ilyanda is at the center," he said. "Or rather the Station is. The range runs out to about a half billion kilometers. You're looking at a Mute fleet. Capital ships and battle cruisers." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.



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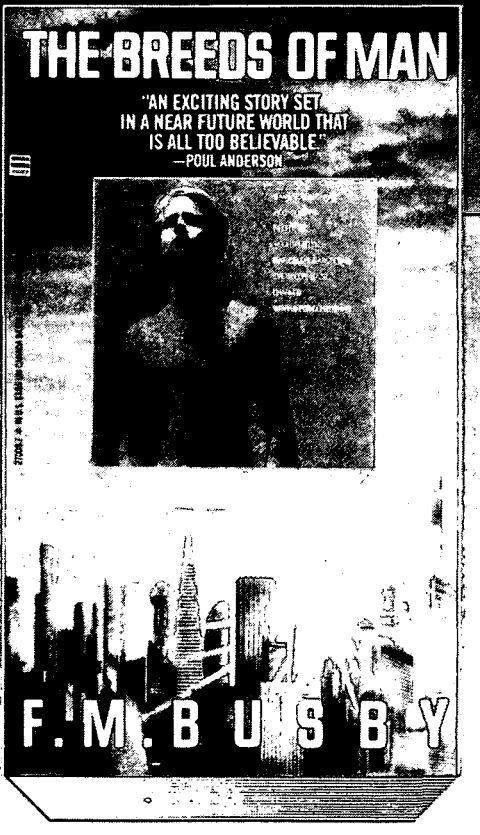


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"What's happening, Miss Lee," he continued, "is that the Navy is about to blow hell out of the sons of bitches." His jaw tightened, and a splinter of light appeared in his eyes. "At last."

"It's been a long time coming," he said. "They've been driving us before them for three years. But today belongs to us." He raised his empty glass in a jeering salute toward the ceiling.

"I'm glad you were able to get people away," I said into the stillness.

He tilted his head in my direction. "Sim wouldn't have had it any other way."

"I never thought the war would come here." Another blip appeared on the screen. "I don't understand it," I said. "Ilyanda's neutral. And I didn't think we were near the fighting."

"Kindrel, there are no neutrals in this war. You've just been letting others do your fighting for you." His voice was not entirely devoid of contempt.

"Ilyanda's at peace!" I shot back, though it seemed rather academic just then. I stared at him, into his eyes, expecting him to flinch. But I saw only annoyance. "Or at least it was," I continued. "Anyhow, thanks for coming." His eyes were puffy and red-rimmed.

He looked away from me. "It's all right."

He turned self-consciously toward the computers and absorbed himself in them. "They're only here," I said, "because you are, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"You've brought your war to us!"

He pushed himself forward in his chair, propped his chin on his fist, and laughed at me. "*You're* judging *us*! You know, you people are really impossible. The only reason you're not dead or in chains is because we've been dying to give you a chance to ride around in your goddam boat!"

"My God," I gasped, remembering the missing shuttle. "Is that why the redeye never got here?"

"Don't worry about it," he said. "It was never coming."

I shook my head. "You're wrong. I overheard some radio traffic shortly after midnight. They were still on schedule then."

"They were *never* coming," he repeated. "We've done everything we could to make this place, this entire world, appear normal."

"Why?" I asked.

"You have the consolation of knowing we are about to turn the war around. The Mutes are finally going to get hurt!" His eyes glowed, and I shuddered.

"You *led* them here," I said.

"Yes." He was on his feet now. "We led them here. We've led them into hell. They think Christopher Sim is on the space station. And they



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want him *very* badly." He refilled his glass. "Sim has never had the firepower to fight this war. He's been trying to hold off an armada with a few dozen light frigates and one battle cruiser." Olander's face brightened. "But he's done a job on the bastards. Anyone else would have been overwhelmed right at the start. But Sim: sometimes I wonder whether he's human."

Or you, I thought. My fingers brushed against the laser.

"Maybe it would be best if you left," he said tonelessly.

I made no move to go. "Why here? Why Ilyanda?"

"We tried to pick a system where the population was small enough to be moved."

I smothered an obscenity. "Did we get to vote on this? Or did Sim just ride in and issue orders?"

"Damn you," he whispered. "You haven't any idea at all what this is about, do you? A million people have died in this war so far. The Mutes have burned Cormoral and the City on the Crag and Far Mordaigne. They've overrun a dozen systems, and the entire frontier is on the edge of collapse." He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "They don't like human beings very much, Miss Lee. And I don't think they plan for any of us to be around when it's over."

"*We* started the war," I objected.

"That's easy to say. You don't know what was going on. But it doesn't matter now anyway. We're long past drawing fine lines. The killing won't stop until we've driven the bastards back where they came from." He switched displays to a status report. "They're closing on the Station now." His lips curled into a vindictive leer. "A sizable chunk of their fleet is already within range. And more arriving all the time." He smiled malevolently, and I can remember thinking that I had never before come face to face with anyone so completely evil. He was really enjoying himself.

"You said Sim doesn't have much firepower—"

"He doesn't."

"Then how—?"

A shadow crossed his face. He hesitated, and looked away toward the monitors. "The Station's shields have gone up," he said. "No, there's nothing up there of ours except a couple of destroyers. They're automated, and the Station's abandoned." The blinking lights on the battle display had increased to a dozen. Some had moved within the inner ring. "All they can see are the destroyers, and something they think is *Corsarius* in dock with its hull laid open. And the bastards are still keeping their distance. But it won't make any difference!"

"*Corsarius*!" I said. "Sim's ship?"



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"It's a big moment for them. They're thinking right now they're going to take him and end the war." He squinted at the graphics.

I was beginning to suspect it was time to take his advice and make for the wharf, get the *Meredith*, and head back to the southern hemisphere. Until the dust settled.

"The destroyers are opening up," he said. "But they won't even slow the Mutes down."

"Why bother?"

"We had to give them some opposition. Keep them from thinking too much."

"Olander," I asked, "if you have no ships up there, what's this all about? How does Sim expect to destroy anything?"

"He won't. But you and I will, Kendril. You and I will inflict such a wound on the Mutes tonight that the sons of bitches will never forget!"

Two monitors went suddenly blank. The images returned, swirls of characters blinking frantically. He leaned forward and frowned. "The Station's taken a hit." He reached toward me, a friendly, soothing gesture, but I stayed away from him.

"And what are you and I going to do to them?" I asked.

"Kendril, we are going to stop the sunrise."

I found that remark a bit murky, and I said so.

"We're going to catch them all," he said. "Everything they've got here, everything out to the half-billion kilometer ring, will be incinerated. Beyond that, if they see right away what's happening and get a running start, they have a chance." He glanced toward the computer. A red lamp glowed on the keyboard. "We have an old Tyrolean freighter, loaded with antimatter. It's balanced in hyper, and it's waiting for a command from me."

"To do what?"

His eyes slid shut, and I could no longer read his expression. "To materialize inside your sun." He hung each word in the still air. "We are going to insert it at the sun's core." A bead of sweat rolled down his chin. "The result, we think, will be—" he paused and grinned, "—moderately explosive."

I could almost have believed there was no world beyond that bar. We'd retreated into the dark, Olander and I and the monitors and the background music and the stone nymphs. All of us.

"A nova?" I asked. My voice must have been barely audible. "You're trying to induce a nova?"

"No. Not a true nova."

"But the effect—"

"—Will be the same." He drew his right hand across his lips. "It's a revolutionary technique. Involves some major breakthroughs in navi-



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gation. It isn't easy, you know, to maintain a relatively static position in hyper. Even tougher than in linear space. The freighter has a tendency to drift." His fingers moved swiftly over the keys, producing technical displays. "Look," he said, pointing first at one, and then at another. "And here . . ." I could not begin to follow. He dropped into a monotone and started to talk about gamma rays and hydrogen atoms. I didn't let him get very far.

"Come on, Olander," I exploded, "you can't expect me to believe that a guy sitting in a bar can blow up a sun!"

"I'm sorry." His eyes changed, and he looked startled, as though he'd forgotten where he was. "You may be right," he said. "It hasn't been tested, so they really don't know. Too expensive to run a test."

I tried to imagine Point Edward engulfed in fire, amid boiling seas and burning forests. It was Gage's city, where we'd explored narrow streets and old bookstores, and pursued each other across rainswept beaches and through candle-lit pubs. And from where we'd first gone to sea. I'd never forgot how it had looked the first time we'd come home, bright and diamond hard against the horizon. Home. Always it would be home.

And I watched Olander through eyes grown suddenly damp, perhaps conscious for the first time that I had come back with the intention to leave Ilyanda, and knowing now that I never would, would never wish to.

"Olander, they left *you* to do this?"

"No." He shook his head vigorously. "It was supposed to happen automatically when the Mutes got close. The trigger was tied in to the sensors on the Station. But the Mutes have had some success at disrupting command and control functions. We couldn't be sure . . ."

"Then they *did* leave you!"

"*No!* Sim would never have allowed it if he'd known. He has confidence in the scanners and computers. Those of us who know a little more about such things do not. So I stayed, and disconnected it, and brought it down here."

"My God, and you're really going to *do* it?"

"It works out better this way. We can catch the bastards at the most opportune moment. You need a human to make that judgment. A machine isn't good enough to do it right."

"Olander, you're talking about destroying a *world*!"

"I know." His voice shook. "I know." His eyes found mine at last. The irises were blue, and I could see white all round their edges. "No one *wanted* this to happen. But we're driven to the wall. If we can't make this work, here, there may be no future for anyone."

I had a hard time finding my voice. "If the danger is so clear, where are Rimway and Toxicon? And Earth? A lot of people think the Mutes



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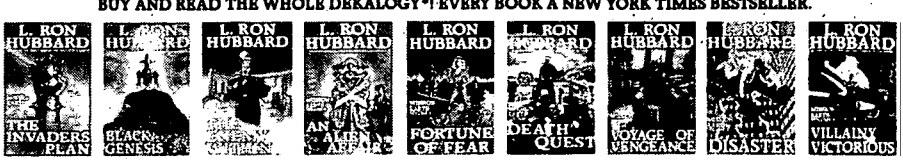


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are open to reason." I was just talking now, my attention riveted to the computer keyboard, to the EXECUTE key, which was longer than the others, and slightly concave.

The laser was cool and hard against my leg.

"Well," he continued, "what the hell. It doesn't matter anymore anyway. A lot of blood has been spilled, and I don't think anybody's much open to reason now. And the only thing that does matter is that they'll kill all of us. If we allow it." He drained the last of his wine, and flung the glass out into the dark. It shattered. "Ciao," he said.

"The nova," I murmured, thinking about the broad southern seas and the trackless forests that no one would ever penetrate and the enigmatic ruins. And the thousands of people to whom, like me, Ilyanda was home. Who would remember when it was gone? "What's the difference between you and the Mutes?"

"I know how you feel, Kindrel."

"You have no idea how I feel—"

"I know *exactly* how you feel. I was on Melisandra when the Mutes burned the City on the Crag. I watched them make an example of the Pelian worlds. Do you know what Cormoral looks like now? Nothing will live there for ten thousand years."

Somebody's chair, his, mine, I don't know, scraped the floor, and the sound echoed round the bar.

"Cormoral and the Pelians were destroyed by their *enemies*!" I was enraged, frightened, terrified. Out of sight under the table, my fingers traced the outline of the weapon. "Has it occurred to you," I asked, as reasonably as I could, "what's going to happen when they go home, and we go back to squabbling among ourselves?"

He nodded. "I know," he said. "There's a lot of risk involved."

"*Risk*?" I pointed a trembling finger at the stack of equipment. "That thing is more dangerous than a half-dozen invasions. For God's sake, we'll survive the Mutes. We survived the ice ages and the nuclear age and the colonial wars and we will sure as hell take care of those sons of bitches if there's no other way.

"But that thing you have in front of you—Matt, don't do this. Whatever you hope to accomplish, the price is too high."

I listened to him breathe. An old love song was running on the sound system. "I have no choice," he said in a dull monotone. He glanced at his display. "They've begun to withdraw. That means they know the Station's empty, and they suspect either a diversion or a trap."

"You *do* have a choice!" I screamed at him.

"No!" He pushed his hands into his jacket pockets as though to keep them away from the keyboard. "I do not."



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Suddenly I was holding the laser, pointing it at the computers. "I'm not going to allow it."

"There's no way you can stop it." He stepped out of the line of fire. "But you're welcome to try."

I backed up a few paces and held the weapon straight out. It was a curious remark, and I played it again. Olander's face was awash with emotions I couldn't begin to put a name to. And I realized what was happening. "If I interrupt the power supply," I said, "it'll trigger. Right?"

His face gave him away.

"Get well away from it." I swung the weapon toward *him*. "We'll just sit here awhile."

He didn't move.

"Back off," I said.

"For God's sake, Kindrel." He held out his hands. "Don't do this. There's no one here but you and me."

"There's a living *world* here, Matt. And if that's not enough, there's a precedent to be set."

He took a step toward the trigger.

"Don't, Matt," I said. "I'll kill you if I have to."

The moment stretched out. "Please, Kindrel," he said at last.

So we remained, facing each other. He read my eyes, and the color drained from him. I held the laser well out where he could see it, aimed at his chest.

The eastern sky was beginning to lighten.

A nerve quivered in his throat. "I should have left it alone," he said, measuring the distance to the keyboard.

Tears were running down my cheeks, and I could hear my voice loud and afraid as though it were coming from outside me. And the entire world squeezed down to the pressure of the trigger against my right index finger. "You didn't *have* to stay," I screamed at him. "It has nothing to do with heroics. You've been in the war too long, Matt. You hate too well."

He took a second step, tentatively, gradually transferring his weight from one foot to the other, watching me, his eyes pleading.

"You were enjoying this, until I came by."

"No," he said. "That's not so."

His muscles tensed. And I saw what he was going to do and I shook my head no and whimpered and he told me to just put the gun down and I stood there looking at the little bead of light at the base of his throat where the bolt would hit and saying no no no . . .

When at last he moved, not toward the computer but toward me, he was far too slow and I killed him.

* * *



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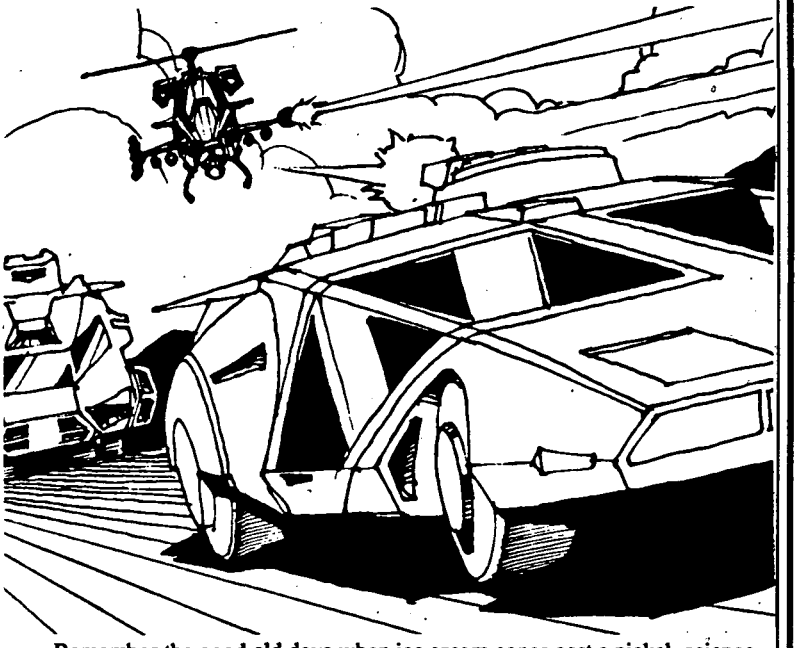

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My first reaction was to get out of there, to leave the body where it had dropped and take the elevator down and run—

I wish to God I had.

The sun was on the horizon. The clouds scattered into the west, and another cool autumn day began.

Matt Olander's body lay twisted beneath the table, a tiny black hole burned through the throat, and a trickle of blood welling out onto the stone floor. His chair lay on its side, and his jacket was open. A pistol, black and lethal and ready to hand, jutted from an inside pocket.

I had never considered the possibility he might be armed. He could have killed me at any time.

What kind of men fight for this Christopher Sim?

This one would have burned Ilyanda, but he could not bring himself to take my life.

What kind of man? I have no answer to that question. Then or now.

I stood a long time over him, staring at him, and at the silently blinking transmitter, with its cold red eye, while the white lights fled toward the outer ring.

And a terrible fear crept through me: I could still carry out his intention, and I wondered whether I didn't owe it to him, to someone, to reach out and strike the blow they had prepared. But in the end I walked away from it, into the dawn.

The black ships that escaped at Ilyanda went on to take a heavy toll. For almost three more years, men and ships died. Christopher Sim performed his more legendary exploits, his Dellacondans held on until Rimway and Earth intervened, and, in the heat of battle, the modern Confederacy was born.

The sun weapon itself was never heard from. Whether, in the end, it wouldn't work, or Sim was unable to lure a large enough force again within range of a suitable target, I don't know.

For most, the war is now something remote, a subject for debate by historians, a thing of vivid memories only for the very old. The Mutes have long since retreated into their sullen worlds. Sim rests with his heroes, and his secrets, lost off Rigel. And Ilyanda still entrances tourists with her misty seas, and researchers with her curious ruins.

Matt Olander lies in a hero's grave at Richardson. I cut his name into a stone, and added the phrase "No Stranger to Valor." When the Dellacondans found it they were puzzled. The epitaph led to a tradition that Olander died defending Point Edward against the Ashiyyur, and that *they* honored his gallantry by erecting the marker. Today, of course, he stands high in the Confederacy's pantheon.

And I: I hid when the Dellacondans came back to find out what had



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happened. And so I spent three years in a city pursued by an army of ghosts which grew daily in number. All slain by my hand. And when the Ilyandans returned at the end of the war, I was waiting.

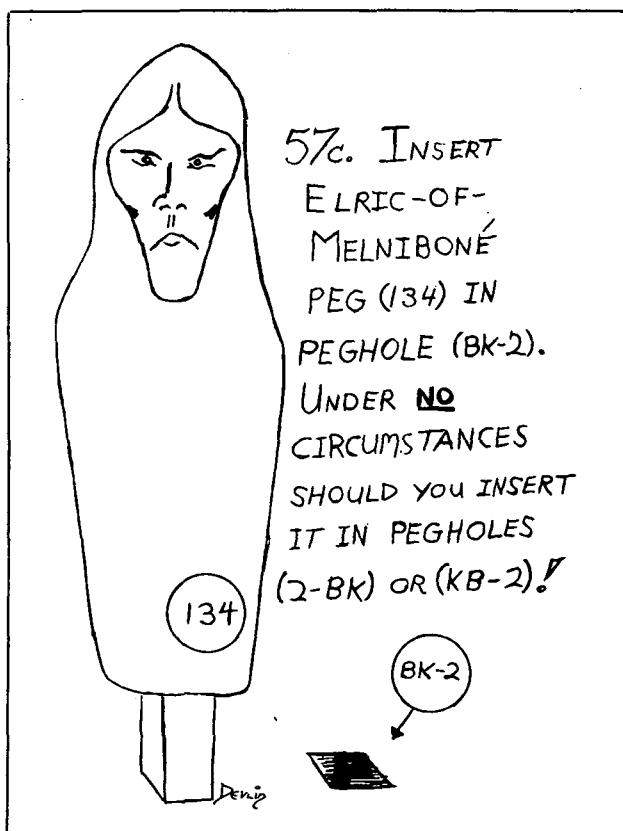
They chose not to believe me. It may have been politics. They may have preferred to forget. And so I am denied even the consolation of public judgment. There is none to damn me. Or to forgive.

I have no doubt I did the right thing.

Despite the carnage, and the fire, I was *right.*

In my more objective moments, in the daylight, I know that. But I know also that whoever reads this document, after my death, will understand that I need more than a correct philosophical stance.

For now, for me, in the dark of Ilyanda's hurtling moons, the war never ends. ●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# THE BISHOP'S DECISION

by Phillip C. Jennings

art: Hank Jankus

Phillip Jennings tells us he "... was raised in a small town in North Dakota during the Eisenhower years, and escaped to Mars via Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Galaxy* and *If* magazines, and the public library." He has published stories in *F&SF*, *Far Frontiers*, and *Amazing*. The following

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All men envied King Louis XIV. Lesser princes aped his splendor from Portugal to Muscovy. Least among them, spiritual and temporal ruler of a patchwork episcopate in the south of Germany, Bishop Von Zweitel was unable to convert Schloss Mutlorn into a Versailles. Yet as he was only five feet four inches tall he was happy to adopt the sun-king's wig and high heels.

Brown curls tumbled from the heap atop his head. "Magnificent," he thought, admiring his stylish elevation in the mirror. He strode back and forth for practice. What a fool he'd make if he stumbled in front of his guests!

Not much chance of that. He flounced out his lace cuffs, took a preliminary pinch of snuff, and instructed Father Klosterman to carry the box as he followed in train.

They passed along an open gallery. In the bailey below firewood lay stacked up to the eaves. What a vulgarity! Would a guest at the French court be obliged to dismount among cords of winter fuel?

The bishop shook his head sadly and hurried on. Trailed by his tall, saturnine secretary, he entered the salon, where buoyant saints drifted among pastel cloudbanks. Huddled below this fanciful ceiling, the abbots and scholars, agents and visitors of his petty court fell into a gratifying silence. Only one voice continued to speak.

"—FLAT. ALL STUFFS OF YOUR LOCAL STAR ISLAND PRESSED INTO A DISK CIRCLING THIS ENERGY. YOUR SUN WILL BE A COLUMN OF LIGHT—"

"I don't understand 'star island,' " remarked the bishop, ignoring the derbwe's breach of etiquette.

The muscles that reared the derbwe's neck drew its caudal knout up and over. It took energy to do that, to shatter and shed the condensate ice that sheeted its all-covering suit; perhaps the creature was in the throes of a violent passion. Either that or its new stance was the equivalent of a bow.

Von Zweitel turned to peer through the cold fog that veiled the derbwe's face. The muscles of the thing's eating tendrils contracted. The sight unnerved him.

The scholarly Sister Casilda bent to whisper into her bishop's ear. "Your Grace, the sun and all the fixed stars are part of an island in the heavens, separated by vast distances from other clouds of stars."

"Excuse me." Von Zweitel lifted the locks that muffled his right ear. "Try that again. The sun and all the fixed stars—"

"You've seen the Milky Way. That's the heart of our island, and certainly most everything we view at night is part of it. Yet our island is merely one among thousands equally as large."



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"I've not read of this in De Fontenelle's new book," Von Zweitel complained, "—notwithstanding I perused it just last night."

"Our astronomers never knew what they were looking at. Their instruments couldn't distinguish one kind of nebula from another or judge their distances. We have the derbwem to thank for this new knowledge."

Normally the creature on whom they nervously smiled their gratitude resembled a gondola balanced between the legs of an ostrich. In its present pose it looked more like a biped lyre. Its dorsal limbs rose stiffly like four miniature shipmasts, yet when it gestured with the foremost the motion was as supple as the writhing of an eel.

It had their attention. "THOSE BRIGHT ISLANDS ARE UNDEVELOPED. ONCE WE MAKE OVER YOUR ISLAND ALL RADIATIONS NOW THROWN TO SPACE WILL SHOWER ONTO THIS FLAT DISK, MAKING IT DIM EXCEPT FOR EYES WHO SEE HEAT."

Bishop Von Zweitel shook his head in nervous indulgence. These derbwem said strange things. At last night's private meeting their ambassador beached on a divan and spent twenty minutes describing how certain stars "fell in" to make holes in the universe. They could compel stars to collapse this way, punching through the fabric of creation. An extravagant way to send messages to God!

Von Zweitel ventured another remark. "Excellency, in your evening visit you spoke of the speed of light. Is this your assertion? Does light take time to move across the ether?"

"EIGHT MINUTES FROM SUN TO EYES. FOUR MILLION YEARS FROM OUR STAR ISLAND TO THIS WORLD. YET WE NOT BE FOUR MILLION OLD. THE EXPLANATION OF THIS I TELL YOU. TIME CHANGES FOR US WHO TRAVEL—"

The derbwe launched into a lecture. Truly these beings were uncouth, preaching at a moment's notice like some anabaptist ranter!

Bishop Von Zweitel's attention wandered. He had trouble conceding that light had speed. If light needed time to move it was inadequate as a symbol of the Godhead. Yet the derbwe insisted that light moved instantaneously *to itself*. Time was a phenomenon apparent only to beings of more material substance!

Too lazy to provide a mental refuge for a mass of crabbed theological formulas, the bishop considered himself a friend of science. He'd never suspected that science could impose its own burden on the intellect, or that its revelations would use language reminiscent of the wisdom of the Church.

What of it? Trust Sister Casilda to master that end of things. His responsibility was to determine whether these derbwem were creatures of a good God or mischiefs spawned by Lucifer!

The derbwe finished its disquisition. The bishop nodded. "Perhaps we



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can enlarge upon these topics at this afternoon's audience in the solarium."

He bowed. Clumsy in its all-covering costume, the derbwe dipped in imitation. Ice tinkled to the floor. "WE WILL TRADE BIG ANSWERS AT THAT TIME," it responded. "I DESCRIBED WHAT WE DO TO SISTER CASILDA SO YOU CAN THINK OVER YOUR QUESTIONS BEFORE WE TALK."

Easing back into boat-shape, the derbwe waddled off, trailing a cloud of frigid fog. At last the other occupants of the salon felt free to speak. Amid a volly of nervous witticisms Sister Casilda probed the bishop's arm with her lorgnette. "We must talk alone," she whispered.

Bishop Von Zweitel waved, nodded, and winked, taking part in three conversations at once. He was a master in the salon, able to hint and flatter, hinder and promise; all with the affable elegance of a born aristocrat. He acknowledged Casilda's request with a brief pat. Half an hour later she was ushered into his study.

"I doubt it would do Father Klosterman any harm to stay and listen."

Sister Casilda ignored his pleasantry. Without invitation she moved to a gilded chair, spread her robes and sat. Though as formidable in education as in bulk, she'd never behaved in such a cavalier manner before. The bishop shrugged off her presumption. Clearly she was distraught. Thoughtful as ever, Father Klosterman poured her a glass of wine.

She swallowed and spoke. "The derbwem say two hundred intelligent races dwell in our region of heaven, and they must negotiate with each. They hope to take all the Earth and the planets of this system, even the sun itself. This and more, and more yet, until the very stars are gone!"

She fell back, pressing her hand to her heart. "Earth and heaven will be consumed in making a disk. They forswear themselves in calling it flat, for on both sides it will bear mountains and seas, rivers and forests. They measure the disk by zones, each fifty million leagues wide, and all encompassing what they call a "Keffa," a whirl of energy beaming forth as pillars of light—"

"Easy, easy!"

Sister Casilda shook her head. "Think of a plate with a hole at the center. Etch a circle about the Keffa-hole as large as you will, drawn so finely as to be invisible to the eye. If the width of your stylus is fifty million leagues, conceive the other dimensions!"

"I am outdone by numbers," admitted the bishop. "Our natural philosophers suggest the world might be older than six thousand years, yet none have been bold to prate of millions! The derbwem spent four million years in transit from their home. What then is all human history? A bagatelle, a mere nothing!"



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"We are to have three zones as our own," the nun continued. "An inconceivable amount of territory!"

"If they can do such things why ask our permission?" Von Zweitel shook his head. Mysteriously God had willed that these creatures select him to act for Christendom, nay, the whole world! The derbwem's spaceship might as easily have descended elsewhere. In the absence of a globe-encompassing government they'd have undertaken negotiations with Doge or Caliph, King, Bey, Maharajah, or Sachem.

Sister Casilda's eyes darted nervously. "If I could know! Consider the fearful danger! How important that we decide aright! I've prayed for a sign that these derbwem are leagued with the divine, for tales have it that the Devil too is a respecter of contracts!"

"Those stories are superstitions, nor do they represent Satan as deceptive. Nonetheless yonder derbwem may be liars capable of manufacturing false signs to mislead our piety."

Father Klosterman spoke. "Your Grace, the derbwem must respect some entity or why would they speak of contracts and negotiations?"

"Yes!" Sister Casilda cried. "We must most certainly find out Who they obey!"

"The true name of God!" the bishop mused. His eyes focused. "We are to have three circles. Hell is composed of circles, is it not?"

"Circles are the most perfect of forms," Sister Casilda answered. "God is known to have taken form as a pillar of light, and angels dance in circles around him. The highest order of spirits are innermost. Our own position would be intermediate. As the derbwem require frigid cold they apportion the outermost dozens of circles to themselves. This is what they've done in other star islands."

"As angels they'd be of less rank than ourselves."

"Can that be doubted? They are powerful but by no means as beautiful as we, nor as gracious."

"Suppose I say no?" Bishop Von Zweitel asked. "Why shouldn't they take themselves elsewhere? Perhaps they'd find Sultan Suleiman more cooperative."

Father Klosterman spoke a second time. "If they're to hear the word yes, let it be from us. We'd be the beneficiaries of their gratitude."

The bishop of Schloss Mutlorn was quite capable of such reasoning; what he sought was a higher wisdom, something to enable him to exercise a responsibility he barely understood. He looked from face to face and saw none forthcoming. Indeed, his two ministers seemed to be imploring him for solace!

What to do? "—I will take all these concerns into account. Thank you." The bishop led his advisers to the door and they made their exits. He



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tossed his peruke into the corner and kicked off his heels. A shrunken Von Zweitel began to pace the carpet.

Earth was to be riven at the end of time. The sun and stars would fall and the seas turn to blood—Perhaps the derbwem's proposal conformed to St. John's revelation!

Yet where was the Second Coming of Christ? And why should these things require a bishop's assent to be set in motion?

"Nor a real bishop, either!" he muttered. Von Zweitel was under no illusions that he was a worthy spiritual shepherd. The Elector had fulfilled a family obligation by appointing him to the Benefice of Zweitel. Grey-haired venerables kneeled before his staff while he was yet a lad of sixteen! He'd spent as many years learning to be a good ruler, yet he lacked the fire of true devotion. He loved life too much to be strict in his vows.

He moved to the windows. Schloss Mutlorn beetled from a pivot of rock almost surrounded by river. The hills of the south shore were covered by dark forest. Below lay a Brueghelesque village whose quays and nets might have belonged to a maritime port. Russet cupolas marked the local church, a baroque structure nestled among rude neighbors.

A depressingly German landscape. The bishop winced and turned away. This was no time to ponder aesthetics, not when he'd been singled out to ring in the Apocalypse. It was time to rally his thoughts, to pray and study.

If only he knew how! Were his Latin good he'd be paging through the Vulgate. Instead he was obliged to fall back on memory, nor was the Book of Revelations one of his favorites.

There'd certainly be decimations if the numbers of faithful were reduced to 144,000. He'd insist on a greater number of survivors, nor only among humanity. Consider animals and birds and fish! Life would be intolerable without parks and gardens, flowers and hunts. Yes, he'd take a firm stand . . .

Firm? What *was* his position? Why should the derbwem make concessions?

The bishop returned to his desk, sharpened a quill and began to scribble notes for the afternoon meeting. He had lunch brought in. Toward the end of the meal he rang for his servant. "Fetch Father Klosterman," he ordered.

The tall, barepated priest entered the study so promptly he must have been waiting in the antechamber. "We used to try witches hereabouts, not so?" Von Zweitel asked.

Klosterman nodded. "During the wars."

The wars! Von Zweitel shuddered. Thirty years of strife and misery had killed seven out of ten of his subjects. The survivors' heirs were so



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disinclined to bloodshed that fog-trailing derbwem moved among them without fear of attack.

He mustered himself. "What of the clergy from those years? Do any survive? I'd have you speak to them and discover how deviltry might be confounded."

Klosterman frowned. "Your Grace—"

"We have repudiated superstition, nor are witches persecuted in my prebend. Still, those grim old torturers might have a word of advice for their spiritual lord."

"As might the witches they failed to catch."

"Are there any? We are forbidden to consult witches, but if there were one no longer active she might recollect something of advantage."

Father Klosterman showed distress by plucking imaginary lint from his cassock. "Do not pursue this course, Your Grace. Only by accident will they say anything useful."

The bishop opened his snuff-box, then paused. "Why?"

"The human soul has many powers. Among these is reason, which sets us apart from the brutes. The derbwem possess a rational intellect and so we are brothers of a special sort, favored by God."

"Yes?"

"Witchcraft deals with facets of the mind which we prefer to ignore. We hardly have names for those mysterious faculties invoked during times of heroic challenge. Perhaps we share nameless attributes with the derbwem, but I doubt it. In all but reason itself, we and the derbwem are different. Those who map the human soul will only mislead you."

"I see. We need the advice of a derbwe witch!" The bishop leaned back and stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Yes, yes," he mumbled. "An interesting approach. That's the way to do it. Get inside their minds and soon enough we'll know why they act as they do."

The audience began an hour later. The derbwe ambassador was ushered into the solarium, a windowed excrescence built atop Mutlorn's most elevated artillery platform. Though the sun was their ally the bishop and his advisers wore thick robes against the chill emanating from the creature. As always, thin sheets of ice formed on the ambassador's suit, then slivered and fell to the carpet.

A servant distributed glasses of himbeergeist and retired to his corner. Von Zweitel sipped to kindle a fire in his belly. "You are beings of power and wisdom," he began. "You come to treat with all humanity. May I ask your title?"

"I AM AMBASSADOR FROM STAR ISLAND FAR AWAY."

The bishop shook his head. "This word, 'ambassador.' What is its literal translation?"

"WE LIKE ME ARE 'LONELY ONES.' "



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"Why is that?"

"BECAUSE WE GO FROM THE MANY."

Von Zweitel frowned. "Are you of a special class by birth? A special breed?"

"NO. WE ARE TAKEN FROM THE MANY BY OTHER LONELY ONES, SO THAT WORK CAN BE DONE."

The bishop turned to Father Klosterman. "Isn't this method extolled in one of our utopias, where a wise aristocracy selects and trains their successors? The practice of the Church is rather similar."

Sister Casilda spoke. "Are you tested before being taken from the Many? Do you keep vows?"

"THIS WE TALK ABOUT SOME OTHER TIME," the derbwe responded.

"But you have us spellbound," Sister Casilda remarked. "If you represent the Church Celestial, as it seems you might . . ."

"WE NEVER BE TESTED," the derbwe conceded. "IT IS STUPID TO TEST. IF SMARTEST TAKEN TO BE LONELY ONES, THEN THE MANY BREEDS LESS SMART DERBWEM. YOUR CHURCH VOWS DO HARM. ALWAYS SMART ONES GO INTO CHURCH AND NOT HAVE CHILDREN. IN TIME HUMANS GET DUMBER AND DUMBER."

"So this 'Many' is the source of offspring?"

"THIS IS NOT IMPORTANT," the derbwe insisted.

Bishop Von Zweitel bent forward. "I have one or two more questions. First, your word for 'negotiation'; what does it signify?"

"WE ASK MANY QUESTIONS. YOU ANSWER. WE MEASURE WHAT WE DO TO FIT YOUR ANSWERS. THAT IS NEGOTIATION."

"When we negotiate with each other both parties give as well as gain. I don't think that word fits what we're doing today. Can you think of another?"

Sister Casilda inhaled sharply. The bishop turned. "Have you something to say?"

"It is the method of natural science to observe and make generalizations. The derbwem are scientific, so they boast. Can they pass judgments on all the world based on what we say today?"

"YES," the derbwe responded. "THAT WE DO."

"One of you, making a judgment about a whole world based on our answers," the bishop repeated. "Forgive me, Excellency, but the fact that you work this way tells me something about the other creatures of the universe. In the heavens there must be no great diversity; no kings, aristocrats, nor peasants.

"As for us, from the days of the Tower of Babel we've been sundered



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by religion, birth, and wealth. On other worlds your practice might be justified, but—"

"WE ALWAYS DO THIS," the derbwe interrupted. "WHY ASK BEFORE MAKING YOUR ISLAND BETTER? WE WERE MADE FOR THE WORK WE DO, AND IT IS SAD WHEN IGNORANT NATIVES SAY NO. TOO BAD. WE HAVE TO ASK ANYWAY."

"Why?"

"THE KEFFA AT THE CENTER OF THE GREAT DISK WE MAKE IS THE SOURCE OF ALL LIGHT AND HEAT. BEINGS OF STRONG ENERGY DWELL IN THE AXIAL BEAMS FLOWING FROM THE KEFFA. THEY CAN BEND LIGHT AND CHANGE DANGEROUS RADIATIONS. WE WORK WITH THEM FOR ALL HISTORY.

"THESE BEINGS NEVER FAIL US. YOU WANT DAYTIME AND NIGHT, SUMMER AND WINTER? THEY BEND THE RAYS OF THE KEFFA TO MAKE BRIGHTNESS OF SUN AND MOON JUST RIGHT FOR YOU. SAME FOR US, TOO."

"Yes?" Von Zweitel persisted.

"THEY MAKE US ASK PERMISSION. NO STAR ISLAND CAN BE REWORKED LIKE WE WANT UNLESS ALL WHO DWELL THERE SAY YES."

"You're not just an agent of the derbwem, but of other races as well?" Father Klosterman asked.

"MANY RACES FROM OTHER STAR ISLANDS COME TO LIVE HERE, BUT YOU NATIVES HAVE FIRST CHOICE, BIGGEST AND BEST PLACES. HUMANS COME TOO WHEN WE GO TO NEXT WILD ISLAND TO REWORK IT INTO DISK, BUT THEN YOU SHARE JUST ONE ZONE WITH MANY OTHERS."

The bishop raised an eyebrow. "You derbwem are more generous with yourselves. You hope to occupy dozens of circles."

"WE LIKE COLD. IF WE DID NOT LIVE IN COLD ZONES THEY WOULD BE WASTED. THERE ARE NONE OTHERS LIKE US, SO THE MAKING OF DISKS IS ADVANTAGE TO US DERBWEM. THEREFORE WE ARE EAGER TO TRAVEL THROUGH SPACE AND BUILD MORE. IT IS OUR SPECIAL WORK."

"Yet you're acquainted with other races. They might be better than you in dealing with humanity. How inept you derbwem are in the art of persuasion! You lack patience. I've yet to hear you tell a joke or indulge in flattery. Though you know something of the Church you've made no attempt to paint yourselves as creatures of God."

The derbwe stood silent for several seconds. "THE KEFFA-DWELLERS LIKE IT SO. YES, IN SOME WAYS WE ARE STUPID. WHY NOT, SINCE WE NEVER USE PERSUASION AMONG OUR OWN KIND?"

"Never use persuasion? What? No demagogues, no courtiers, no mer-



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chants? Are there any folk so artless among our human kind; magistrates, vintners, husbandmen? —Even the plowman coaxes his ox!"

As the perplexed bishop buried his face in his hands Sister Casilda began to expostulate. "Your Grace, these Keffa-dwellers are angels! The Keffa is a hole in the universe, so they're closest to God of the things of creation. Is it any wonder they're good, insisting we natives approve or deny the derbwem's proposals?

"As for their procedure, remember the words of Saint Paul? 'As through one man sin came into the world, so also by one man we are saved!' "

"Blasphemy!" Father Klosterman rebuked.

"I do not compare His Grace to Jesus Christ. I merely point out that God makes one person stand for many."

Von Zweitel raised his head. "How can any race exist without persuasion? What is language for? Before we are weaned, nurses cajole us, humor us, tempt us. Now we deal with a creature for whom none of this comes naturally!"

The derbwe stepped back. The humans in the solarium were enmeshed in yet another verbal frenzy. Their minds were nimble enough to dart from blasphemy to linguistics; its was not.

Sister Casilda tapped her lorgnette for attention. "Perhaps this derbwe is less than us, as its place is outermost from the Keffa. To us it lacks charm. Yet the good God has found a role for it. Does not the Lord use that which is foolish to confound the wise?"

The bishop waved for silence. Murky as his mental processes were, he could usually tell when he was on the verge of a brainstorm. Something of the sort was happening now. As the seconds passed he took a pinch of snuff and leaned back in his chair.

"If we assent to this proposal," he began. "—If we assent, I say, it would be out of no personal interest. We'd be better served if our subjects stayed close at hand. Transplanted to a celestial zone they'd be free to disperse over a region a thousand times the size of Asia."

Father Klosterman frowned. "We'd revert to savagery!"

"Right now we're concerned with God's will. Should this derbwe be an agent of the Devil it would tempt us with wealth, pleasures, and power. In point of fact its proposals are by no means so venal.

"On the other hand, if we deny it the opportunity to rework our star island we should do so out of mistrust and because its manners are crude. As Sister Casilda mentioned, God uses the humble to bring down the great. If this event be a test of our spiritual maturity we'd be wise to accede to our strange visitors' proposals."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Sister Casilda.

The bishop felt perilously close to decision. He cast about for rescue. "Father Klosterman, what do you think?"


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The tall priest scratched his pate. "The prophets tell us that creatures of light have visited our world. Like the derbwem's Keffa-angels, they work to promote righteousness."

"So you agree with Sister—"

"Your Grace, I find it difficult to bring all the facts into a single frame. Remember, the Keffa-angels use the derbwem for negotiation because yon creatures are direct and artless. It's easy to conclude that they disapprove of subtlety.

"If so, their earthly visitations could not have been meant to prepare us for the derbwem, although by their efforts we know of pillars of fire and dancing circles of Seraphs and Cherubs."

Father Klosterman fell silent. The bishop rapped the table. "Go on."

"Are there factions among the angelic host? Do our angels support or oppose the redevelopment of our star island? Our angels inspired Sacred Scripture. It has to be the policy of the Church to take their side. As they've come to Earth and brought us the consolations of religion, I'm inclined to believe they have other designs for humanity than those proposed by the derbwe ambassador."

"The Second Coming—"

"Exactly. The derbwem promise an apocalypse, but what about the dead? Will they be brought to life? Will there be a Last Judgment?"

Human eyes trained on the derbwe. "NO," the creature responded, rearing back into lyre-posture. Shingles of ice crashed to the floor. "WE NOT MAKE THE LONG DEAD ALIVE AGAIN. ONLY THE SHORT DEAD. THAT BE LESS DIFFICULT. YOU HUMANS LEARN HOW PRETTY SOON."

The bishop rubbed his chill hands. "You've heard our speculations. God has an agenda for humanity. What you offer is only part of the agenda, not all. Were we greedy on behalf of our race we'd say yes to you, but God's angels inspire us with dreams beyond such greed.

"As for the other items on the agenda, such as immortality; do you feel we might achieve these things within, say, a few centuries? Might we nurse such spectacular hopes?"

"PERHAPS. IF YOUR HISTORY GOES RIGHT—"

"We'll trust our angels to guide us."

The derbwe's tendrils contracted. "DOES THIS MEAN YOU SAY NO?"

"If the human race is distributed over three celestial zones we'd spread and scatter. Civilization would suffer. We'd be in no position to learn how to raise the dead nor judge the living. It's in our interest to delay you until we've bettered ourselves. Give us a thousand years, then come and ask again."

"THREE HUNDRED," the derbwe responded. "I VISIT TWO OTHER



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RACES IN THIS SECTOR, THEN COME BACK. ANYTHING MORE WASTES TOO MUCH TIME."

"Three hundred, then!" Bishop Von Zweitel leaned back in relief. "I'll leave notes for my successor. Never fear: as long as the Holy Roman Empire survives your race will be welcomed in peace and amity!"

The ambassador altered postures, turned, and stalked off. With trembling hands the bishop signaled a second round of himbeergeist. As the room warmed he stood to propose a toast. "When the tread of an ox fails to crush an ant, is there triumph? When the ant is killed is there tragedy? No. The forces were unequal, nor did the ant use wisdom in her ramblings.

"Likewise for us. If I knew why we were granted three hundred years I might say something to posterity. To what do we owe the preservation of our present status? Have I done well or not?

"Perhaps it does not matter. I have shifted the responsibility from my own shoulders, a personal victory and one not entirely selfish, since surely I'm not the wisest of men. Therefore I drink to the future, when death is overcome and magistrates of prudence rule all the Earth. They must do better than I! Here's to 1988!"

The derbwe returned to its spaceship. The vessel rose aloft. Once beyond this world's torrid atmosphere the ambassador removed its environment suit. It flipped a switch to open the main communication channel. "WHAT DID THEY SAY?" the navigator inquired.

"WHAT DO THEY ALWAYS SAY? 'WAIT! GIVE US A FEW GENERATIONS TO MAKE THE DECISION.' "

"YOU ANSWERED NO, OF COURSE."

"I ANSWERED YES. THERE'S SOMETHING PECULIAR ABOUT THIS PLANET. THEY CLAIM TO HAVE HAD VISITATIONS; STRANGE ENTITIES, BEINGS OF LIGHT—"

"WE'D BETTER TREAT THEM GINGERLY. THE KEFFA-DWELLERS MAY BE MONITORING US AGAIN."

"THEY WERE ABOUT TO AGREE TO OUR PLANS FOR REASONS I COULD NOT UNDERSTAND. A SHORT WHILE LATER THEY WERE READY TO SAY NO FOR EQUALLY MYSTERIOUS REASONS. I CONFESS I WAS RELIEVED WHEN THEY ASKED FOR A DELAY. IT MADE THEM NORMAL. I HOPE THE NEXT TIME I TALK TO THEM THEY'LL MAKE MORE SENSE!" ●

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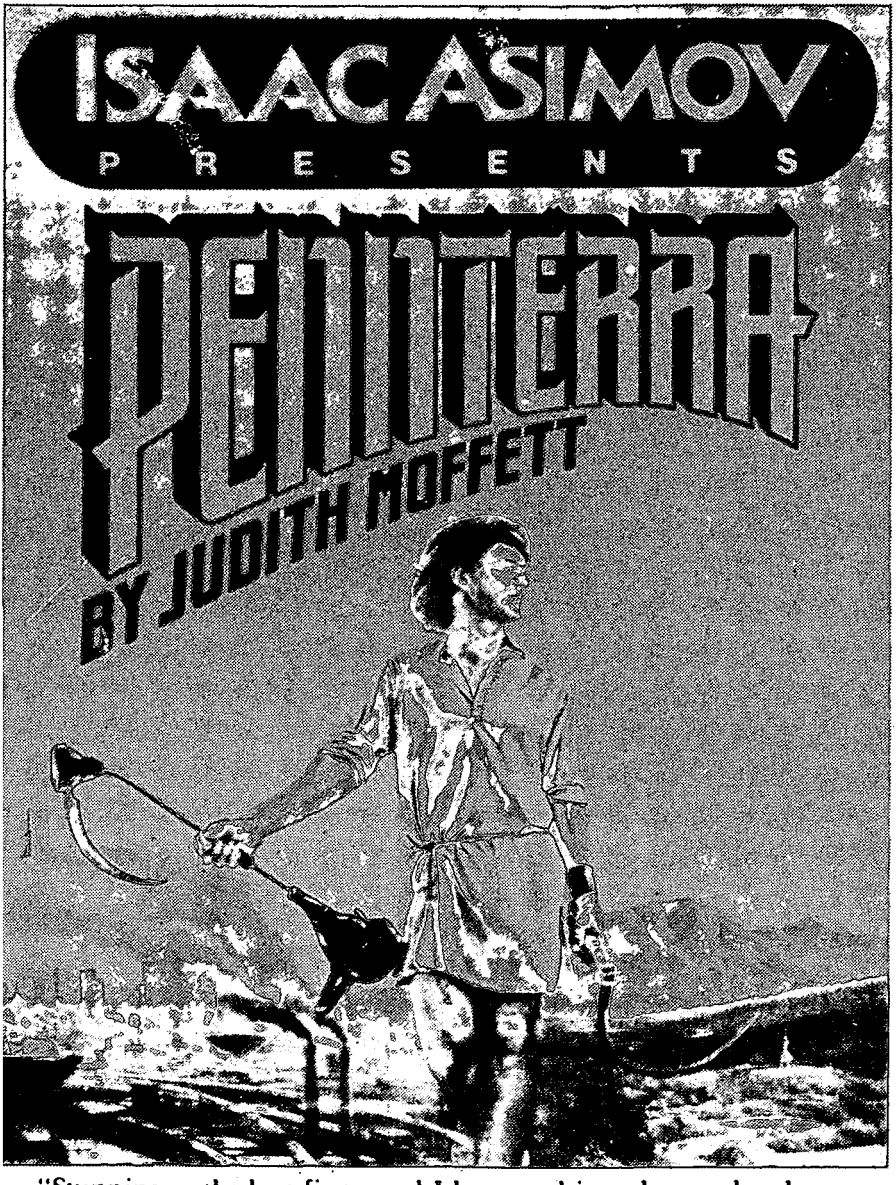


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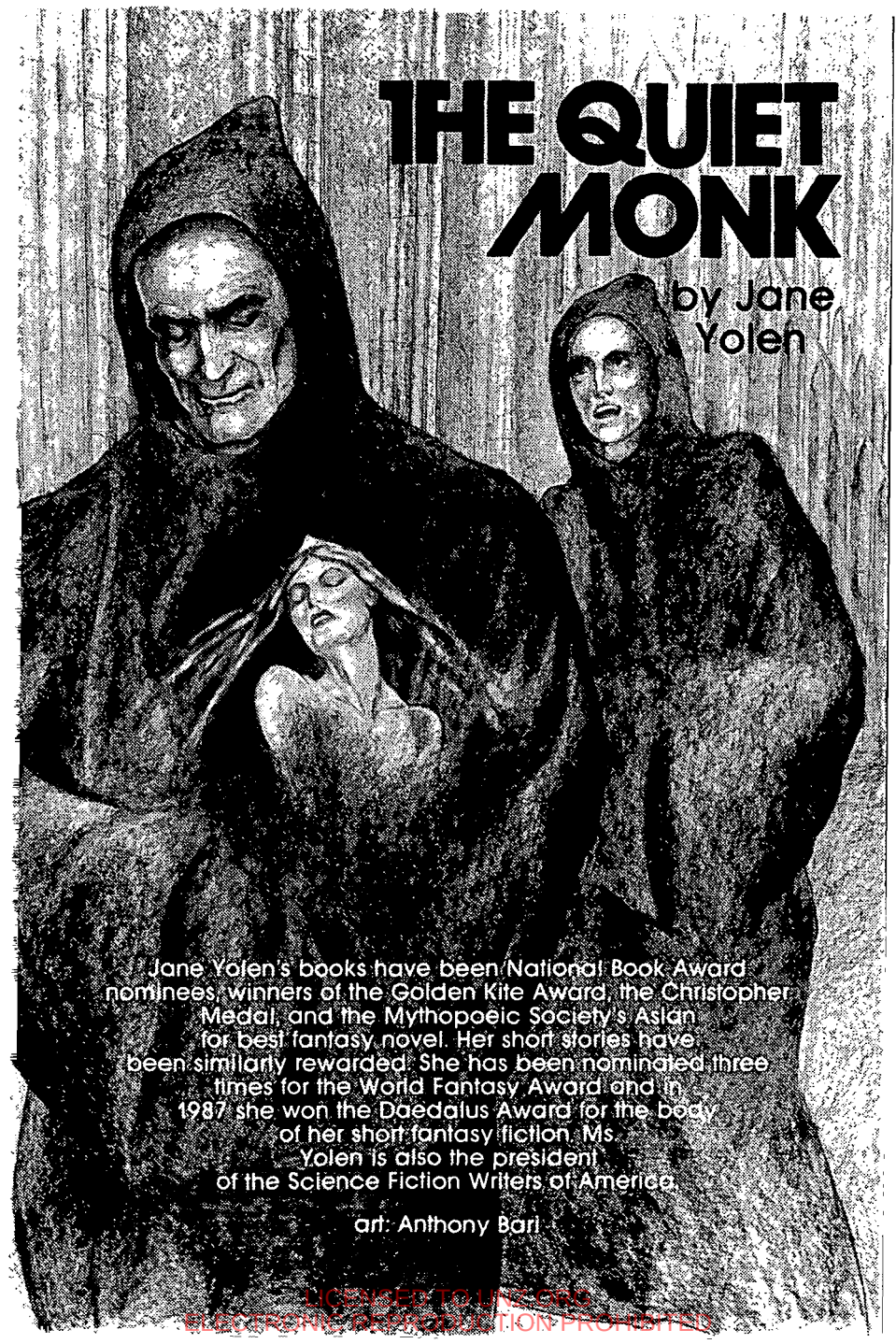
# THE QUIET MONK

by Jane Yolen



Jane Yolen's books have been National Book Award nominees, winners of the Golden Kite Award, the Christopher Medal, and the Mythopoëic Society's Aslan for best fantasy novel. Her short stories have been similarly rewarded. She has been nominated three times for the World Fantasy Award and in 1987 she won the Daedalus Award for the body of her short fantasy fiction. Ms. Yolen is also the president of the Science Fiction Writers of America.

art: Anthony Bari

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*Glastonbury Abbey, in the year of Our Lord, 1191*

He was a tall man, and his shoulders looked broad even under the shapeless disguise of the brown sacking. The hood hid the color of his hair and, when he pushed the hood back, the tonsure was so close cropped, he might have been a blonde or a redhead or gray. It was his eyes that held one's interest most. They were the kind of blue that I had only seen on midsummer skies, with the whites the color of bleached muslin. He was a handsome man, with a strong, thin nose and a mouth that would make all the women in the parish sure to shake their heads with the waste of it. They were a lusty lot, the parish dames, so I had been warned.

I was to be his guide as I was the spriest of the brothers, even with my twisted leg, for I was that much younger than the rest, being newly come to my vocation, one of the few infant oblates who actually joined that convocation of saints. Most left to go into trade, though a few, it must be admitted, joined the army, safe in their hearts for a peaceful death.

Father Joseph said I was not to call the small community "saints," for sainthood must be earned not conferred, but my birth father told me, before he gave me to the abbey, that by living in such close quarters with saintly men I could become one. And that he, by gifting me, would win a place on high. I am not sure if all this was truly accomplished, for my father died of a disease his third wife brought to their marriage bed, a strange wedding portion indeed. And mostly my time in the abbey was taken up not in prayer side by side with saints but on my knees cleaning the abbot's room, the long dark halls, and the *dortoir*. Still, it was better than being back at home in Meade's Hall where I was the butt of every joke, no matter I was the son of the lord. His eighth son, born twisted ankle to thigh, the murderer of his own mother at the hard birthing. At least in Glastonbury Abbey I was needed, if not exactly loved.

So when the tall wanderer knocked on the door late that Sunday night, and I was the watcher at the gate, Brother Sanctus being abed with a shaking fever, I got to see the quiet monk first.

It is wrong, I know, to love another man in that way. It is wrong to worship a fellow human even above God. It is the one great warning dunned into infant oblates from the start. For a boy's heart is a natural altar and many strange deities ask for sacrifice there. But I loved him when first I saw him for the hope I saw imprinted on his face and the mask of sorrow over it.

He did not ask to come in; he demanded it. But he never raised his voice nor spoke other than quietly. That is why we dubbed him the Quiet Monk and rarely used his name. Yet he owned a voice with more authority than even Abbot Giraldus could command, for *he* is a shouter. Until I met the Quiet Monk, I had quaked at the abbot's bluster. Now I know it for what it truly is: fear masquerading as power.



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"I seek a quiet corner of your abbey and a word with your abbot after his morning prayers and ablutions," the Quiet Monk said.

I opened the gate, conscious of the squawking lock and the cries of the wood as it moved. Unlike many abbeys, we had no rooms ready for visitors. Indeed we never entertained guests anymore. We could scarce feed ourselves these days. But I did not tell *him* that. I led him to my own room, identical to all the others save the abbot's, which was even meaner, as Abbot Giraldus reminded us daily. The Quiet Monk did not seem to notice, but nodded silently and eased himself onto my thin pallet, falling asleep at once. Only soldiers and monks have such a facility. My father, who once led a cavalry, had it. And I, since coming to the abbey, had it, too. I covered him gently with my one thin blanket and crept from the room.

In the morning, the Quiet Monk talked for a long time with Abbot Giraldus and then with Fathers Joseph and Paul. He joined us in our prayers, and when we sang, his voice leaped over the rest, even over the sopranos of the infant oblates and the lovely tenor of Brother John. He stayed far longer on his knees than any, at the last prostrating himself on the cold stone floor for over an hour. That caused the abbot much distress, which manifested itself in a tantrum aimed at my skills at cleaning. I had to rewash the floor in the abbot's room where the stones were already smooth from his years of penances.

Brother Denneys—for so was the Quiet Monk's name, called he said after the least of boys who shook him out of a dream of apathy—was given leave to stay until a certain task was accomplished. But before the task could be done, permission would have to be gotten from the pope.

What that task was to be, neither the abbot nor Fathers Joseph or Paul would tell. And if I wanted to know, the only one I might turn to was Brother Denneys himself. Or I could wait until word came from the Holy Father, which word—as we all knew full well—might take days, weeks, even months over the slow roads between Glastonbury and Rome. If word came at all.

Meanwhile, Brother Denneys was a strong back and a stronger hand. And wonder of wonders (a miracle, said Father Joseph, who did not parcel out miracles with any regularity), he also had a deep pocket of gold which he shared with Brother Aermand, who cooked our meagre meals. As long as Brother Denneys remained at the abbey, we all knew we would eat rather better than we had in many a year. Perhaps that is why it took so long for word to come from the Pope. So it was our small convocation of saints became miners, digging gold out of a particular seam. Not all miracles, Father Joseph had once said, proceed from a loving heart. Some,



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he had mused, come from too little food or too much wine or not enough sleep. And, I added to myself, from too great a longing for gold.

Ours was not a monastery where silence was the rule. We had so little else, talk was our one great privilege, except of course on holy days, which there were rather too many of. As was our custom, we foregathered at meals to share the day's small events: the plants beginning to send through their green hosannahs, the epiphanies of birds' nest, and the prayerful bits of gossip any small community collects. It was rare we talked of our pasts. The past is what had driven most of us to Glastonbury. Even Saint Patrick, that most revered of holy men, it was said came to Glastonbury posting ahead of his long past. Our little wattled church had heard the confessions of good men and bad, saints of passing fairness and sinners of surprisng depravity, before it had been destroyed seven years earlier by fire. But the stories that Brother Denneys told us that strange spring were surely the most surprising confessions of all, and I read in the expressions of the abbot and Fathers Joseph and Paul a sudden overwhelming greed that surpassed all understanding.

What Brother Denneys rehearsed for us were the matters that had set him wandering: a king's wife betrayed, a friendship destroyed, a repentance sought, and over the many years a driving need to discover the queen's grave, that he might plead for forgiveness at her crypt. But all this was not new to the father confessors who had listened to lords and ploughmen alike. It was the length of time he had been wandering that surprised us.

Of course we applauded his despair and sanctified his search with a series of oratories sung by our choir. Before the church had burned down, we at Glastonbury had been noted for our voices, one of the three famed perpetual choirs, the others being at Caer Garadawg and at Bangor. I sang the low ground bass, which surprised everyone who saw me, for I am thin and small with a chest many a martyr might envy. But we were rather fewer voices than we might have been seven years previously, the money for the church repair having gone instead to fund the Crusades. Fewer voices—and quite a few skeptics, though the abbot, and Fathers Paul and Joseph, all of whom were in charge of our worldly affairs, were quick to quiet the doubters because of that inexhaustible pocket of gold.

How long had he wandered? Well, he certainly did not look his age. Surely six centuries should have carved deeper runes on his brow and shown the long bones. But in the end, there was not a monk at Glastonbury, including even Brother Thomas, named after that doubting forebear, who remained unconvinced.

Brother Denneys revealed to us that he had once been a knight, the



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fairest of that fair company of Christendom who had accompanied the mighty King Arthur in his search for the grail.

"I who was Lancelot du Lac," he said, his voice filled with that quiet authority, "am now but a wandering mendicant. I seek the grave of that sweetest lady whom I taught to sin, skin upon skin, tongue into mouth like fork into meat."

If we shivered deliciously at the moment of the telling, who can blame us, especially those infant oblates just entering their manhood. Even Abbot Giraldus forgot to cross himself, so moved was he by the confession.

But all unaware of the stir he was causing, Brother Denneys continued.

"She loved the king, you know, but not the throne. She loved the man of him, but not the monarch. He did not know how to love a woman. He husbanded a kingdom, you see. It was enough for him. He should have been a saint."

He was silent then, as if in contemplation. We were all silent, as if he had set us a parable that we would take long years unraveling, as scholars do a tale.

A sigh from his mouth, like the wind over an old unused well, recalled us. He did not smile. It was as if there were no smiles left in him, but he nodded and continued.

"What does a kingdom need but to continue? What does a queen need but to bear an heir?" He paused was not to hear the questions answered but to draw deep breath. He went on. "I swear that was all that drove her into my arms, not any great adulterous love for me. Oh, for a century or two I still fancied ours was the world's great love, a love borne on the wings of magic first and then the necromancy of passion alone. I cursed and blamed that witch Morgaine even as I thanked her. I cursed and blamed the stars. But in the end I knew myself a fool, for no man is more foolish than when he is misled by his own base maunderings." He gestured downward with his hand, dismissing the lower half of his body, bit his lip as if in memory, then spoke again.

"When she took herself to Amesbury Convent, I knew the truth but would not admit it. Lacking the hope of a virgin birth, she had chosen me—not God—to fill her womb. In that I failed her even as God had. She could not hold my seed; I could not plant a healthy crop. There was one child that came too soon, a tailed infant with bulging eyes, more *mer* than human. After that there were no more." He shivered.

I shivered.

We all shivered, thinking on that monstrous child.

"When she knew herself a sinner, who had sinned without result, she committed herself to sanctity alone, like the man she worshipped, the husband she adored. I was forgot."



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One of the infant oblates chose that moment to sigh out loud, and the abbot threw him a dark look, but Brother Denneys never heard.

"Could I do any less than she?" His voice was so quiet then, we all strained forward in the pews to listen. "Could I strive to forget my sinning self? I had to match her passion for passion, and so I gave my sin to God." He stood and with one swift, practiced movement pulled off his robe and threw himself naked onto the stone floor.

I do not know what others saw, but I was so placed that I could not help but notice. From the back, where he lay full length upon the floor, he was a well-muscled man. But from the front he was as smoothly wrought as a girl. In some frenzy of misplaced penitence in the years past, he had cut his manhood from him, dedicating it—God alone knew where—on an altar of despair.

I covered my face with my hands and wept; wept for his pain and for his hopelessness and wept that I, crooked as I was, could not follow him on his long, lonely road.

We waited for months for word to come from Rome, but either the Holy Father was too busy with the three quarrelsome kings and their Crusades, or the roads between Glastonbury and Rome were closed, as usual, by brigands. At any rate, no message came, and still the Quiet Monk worked at the abbey, paying for the privilege out of his inexhaustible pocket. I spent as much time as I could working by his side, which meant I often did double and triple duty. But just to hear his soft voice rehearsing the tales of his past was enough for me. Dare I say it? I preferred his stories to the ones in the Gospels. They had all the beauty, the magic, the mystery, and one thing more. They had a human passion, a life such as I could never attain.

One night, long after the winter months were safely past and the sun had warmed the abbey gardens enough for our spades to snug down easily between the rows of last year's plantings, Brother Denneys came into my cell. Matins was past for the night and such visits were strictly forbidden.

"My child," he said quietly, "I would talk with you."

"Me?" My voice cracked as it had not this whole year past. "Why me?" I could feel my heart beating out its own canonical hours, but I was not so far from my days as an infant oblate that I could not at the same time keep one ear tuned for footsteps in the hall.

"You, Martin," he said, "because you listen to my stories and follow my every move with the eyes of a hound to his master or a squire his knight."

I looked down at the stone floor unable to protest, for he was right. It was just that I had not known he had noticed my faithfulness.



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"Will you do something for me if I ask it?"

"Even if it were to go against God and his saints," I whispered. "Even then."

"Even if it were to go against Abbot Giraldus and his rule?"

"Especially then," I said under my breath, but he heard.

Then he told me what had brought him specifically to Glastonbury, the secret which he had shared with the abbot and Fathers Paul and Joseph, the reason he waited for word from Rome that never came.

"There was a bard, a Welshman, with a voice like a demented dove, who sang of this abbey and its graves. But there are many abbeys and many acres of stones throughout this land. I have seen them all. Or so I thought. But in his rhymes—and in his cups—he spoke of Glastonbury's two pyramids with the grave between. His song had a ring of Merlin's truth in it, which that mage had spoke long before the end of our tale: *'a little green, a private peace, between the standing stones.'* "

I must have shaken my head, for he began to recite a poem with the easy familiarity of the mouth which sometimes remembers what the mind has forgot.

*A time will come when what is three makes one:*
*A little green, a private peace, between the standing stones.*
*A gift of gold shall betray the place at a touch.*
*Absolution rests upon its mortal couch.*

He spoke with absolute conviction, but the whole spell made less sense to me than the part. I did not answer him.

He sighed. "You do not understand. The grave between those stone pyramids is the one I seek. I am sure of it now. But your abbot is adamant. I cannot have permission to unearth the tomb without a nod from Rome. Yet I must open it, Martin, I must. She is buried within and I must throw myself at her dear dead feet and be absolved." He had me by the shoulders.

"Pyramids?" I was not puzzled by his passion or by his utter conviction that he had to untomb his queen. But as far as I knew there were no pyramids in the abbey's yard.

"There are two tapered plinths," Brother Denneys said. "With carvings on them. A whole roster of saints." He shook my shoulders as if to make me understand.

Then I knew what he meant. Or at least I knew the plinths to which he referred. They looked little like pyramids. They were large standing tablets on which the names of the abbots of the past and other godly men of this place ran down the side like rainfall. It took a great imagining—or a greater need—to read a pair of pyramids there. And something more. I *had* to name it.

"There is no grave there, Brother Denneys. Just a sward, green in the



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spring and summer, no greener place in all the boneyard. We picnic there once a year to remember God's gifts."

"That is what I hoped. That is how Merlin spoke the spell. *A little green. A private peace.* My lady's place would be that green."

"But there is nothing there!" On this one point I would be adamant.

"You do not know that, my son. And my hopes are greater than your knowledge." There was a strange cast to his eyes that I could just see, for a sliver of moonlight was lighting my cell. "Will you go with me when the moon is full, just two days hence? I cannot dig it alone. Someone must needs stand guardian."

"Against whom?"

"Against the mist maidens, against the spirits of the dead."

"I can only stand against the abbot and those who watch at night." I did not add that I could also take the blame. He was a man who brought out the martyr in me. Perhaps that was what had happened to his queen.

"Will you?"

I looked down the bed at my feet, outlined under the thin blanket in that same moonlight. My right foot was twisted so severely that, even disguised with the blanket, it was grotesque. I looked up at him, perched on my bedside. He was almost smiling at me.

"I will," I said. "God help me, I will."

He embraced me once, rose, and left the room.

How slowly, how quickly those two days flew by. I made myself stay away from his side as if by doing so I could avert all suspicion from our coming deed. I polished the stone floors along the hall until one of the infant oblates, young Christopher of Chedworth, slipped and fell badly enough to have to remain the day under the infirmarer's care. The abbot removed me from my duties and set me to hoeing the herb beds and washing the pots as penance.

And the Quiet Monk did not speak to me again, nor even nod as he passed, having accomplished my complicity. Should we have known that all we did *not* do signaled even more clearly our intent? Should Brother Denneys, who had been a man of battle, have plotted better strategies? I realize now that as a knight he had been a solitary fighter. As a lover, he had been caught out at his amours. Yet even then, even when I most certainly was denying Him, God was looking over us and smoothing the stones in our paths.

Matins was done and I had paid scant attention to the psalms and even less to the antiphons. Instead I watched the moon as it shone through the chapel window, illuminating the glass picture of Lazarus rising from the dead. Twice Brother Thomas had elbowed me into the proper re-



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sponses and three times Father Joseph had glared down at me from above.

But Brother Denneys never once gave me the sign I awaited, though the moon made a full halo over the lazar's head.

Dejected, I returned to my cell and flung myself onto my knees, a position that was doubly painful to me because of my bad leg, and prayed to the God I had neglected to deliver me from false hopes and wicked promises.

And then I heard the slap of sandals coming down the hall. I did not move from my knees, though the pains shot up my right leg and into my groin. I waited, taking back all the prayers I had sent heavenward just moments before, and was rewarded for my faithlessness by the sight of the Quiet Monk striding into my cell.

He did not have to speak. I pulled myself up without his help, smoothed down the skirts of my cassock so as to hide my crooked leg, and followed him wordlessly down the hall.

It was silent in the dark *dortoir,* except for the noise of Brother Thomas's strong snores and a small pop-pop-popping sound that punctuated the sleep of the infant oblates. I knew that later that night, the novice master would check on the sleeping boys, but he was not astir now. Only the gatekeeper was alert, snug at the front gate and waiting for a knock from Rome that might never come. But we were going out the back door and into the graveyard. No one would hear us there.

Brother Denneys had a great shovel ready by the door. Clearly, he had been busy while I was on my knees. I owed him silence and duty. And my love.

We walked side by side through the cemetary, threading our way past many headstones. He slowed his natural pace to my limping one, though I know he yearned to move ahead rapidly. I thanked him silently and worked hard to keep up.

There were no mist maidens, no white robed ghosts moaning aloud beneath the moon, nor had I expected any. I knew more than most how the mind conjures up monsters. So often jokes had been played upon me as a child, and a night in the boneyard was a favorite in my part of the land. Many a chilly moon I had been left in our castle graveyard, tied up in an open pit or laid flat on a new slab. My father used to laugh at the pranks. He may even have paid the pranksters. After all, he was a great believer in the toughened spirit. But I like to think he was secretly proud that I never complained. I had often been cold and the ache settled permanently in my twisted bones, but I was never abused by ghosts and so did not credit them.

All these memories and more marched across my mind as I followed Brother Denneys to the pyramids that bordered his hopes.



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There were no ghosts, but there *were* shadows, and more than once we both leaped away from them, until we came at last to the green, peaceful place where the Quiet Monk believed his lost love lay buried.

"I will dig," he said, "and you will stand there as guard."

He pointed to a spot where I could see the dark outlines of both church and housing, and in that way know quickly if anyone was coming toward us this night. So while he dug, in his quiet, competent manner, I climbed up upon a cold stone dedicated to a certain Brother Silas, and kept the watch.

The only accompaniment to the sound of his spade thudding into the sod was the long, low whinny of a night owl on the hunt and the scream of some small animal that signaled the successful end. After that, there was only the soft *thwack-thwack* of the spade biting deeper and deeper into the dirt of that unproved grave.

He must have dug for hours; I had only the moon to mark the passage of time. But he was well down into the hole with but the crown of his head showing when he cried out.

I ran over to the edge of the pit and stared down.

"What is it?" I asked, staring between the black shadows.

"Some kind of wood," he said.

"A coffin?"

"More like the barrel of a tree," he said. He bent over. "Definitely a tree. Oak, I think."

"Then your bard was wrong," I said. "But then, he was a Welshman."

"It is a Druid burial," he said. "That is what the oak means. Merlin would have fixed it up."

"I thought Merlin died first. Or disappeared. You told me that. In one of your stories."

He shook his head. "It is a Druid trick, no doubt of it. You will see." He started digging again, this time at a much faster pace, the dirt sailing backwards and out of the pit, covering my sandals before I moved. A fleck of it hit my eye and made me cry. I was a long while digging it out, a long while weeping.

"That's it, then," came his voice. "And there's more besides."

I looked over into the pit once again. "More?"

"Some sort of stone, with a cross on the bottom side."

"Because she was Christian?" I asked.

He nodded. "The Druids had to give her that. They gave her little else."

The moon was mostly gone, but a thin line of light stretched tight across the horizon. I could hear the first bells from the abbey, which meant Brother Angelus was up and ringing them. If we were not at prayers, they would look for us. If we were not in our cells alone, I knew



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they would come out here. Abbot Giraldus might have been a blusterer but he was not a stupid man.

"Hurry," I said.

He turned his face up to me and smiled. "All these years waiting," he said. "All these years hoping. All these years of false graves." Then he turned back and, using the shovel as a pry, levered open the oak cask.

Inside were the remains of two people, not one, with the bones intertwined, as if in death they embraced with more passion than in life. One was clearly a man's skeleton, with the long bones of the legs fully half again the length of the other's. There was a helm such as a fighting man might wear lying crookedly near the skull. The other skeleton was marked with fine gold braids of hair, that caught the earliest bit of daylight.

"Guenivere," the Quiet Monk cried out in full voice for the first time, and he bent over the bones, touching the golden hair with a reverent hand.

I felt a hand on my shoulder but did not turn around, for as I watched, the golden skein of hair turned to dust under his fingers, one instant a braid and the next a reminder of time itself.

Brother Denneys threw himself onto the skeletons, weeping hysterically and I—I flung myself down into the pit, though it was a drop of at least six feet. I pulled him off the brittle, broken bones and cradled him against me until his sorrow was spent. When I looked up, the grave was ringed around with the familiar faces of my brother monks. At the foot of the grave stood the abbot himself, his face as red and as angry as a wound.

Brother Denneys was sent away from Glastonbury, of course. He himself was a willing participant in the exile. For even though the little stone cross had the words HIC JACET ARTHURUS REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS carved upon it, he said it was not true. That the oak casket was nothing more than a boat from one of the lake villages overturned. That the hair we both saw so clearly in that early morning light was nothing more than grave mold.

"She is somewhere else, not here," he said, dismissing the torn earth with a wave of his hand. "And I must find her."

I followed him out the gate and down the road, keeping pace with him step for step. I follow him still. His hair has gotten grayer over the long years, a strand at a time, but cannot keep up with the script that now runs across my brow. The years as his squire have carved me deeply but his sorrowing face is untouched by time or the hundreds of small miracles he, all unknowing, brings with each opening of a grave: the girl in



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Westminster whose once blind eyes can now admit light, a Shropshire lad, dumb from birth, with a tongue that can now make rhymes.

And I understand that he will never find this particular grail. He is in his own hell and I but chart its regions, following after him on my two straight legs. A small miracle, true. In the winter, in the deepest snow, the right one pains me, a twisting memory of the old twisted bones. When I cry out in my sleep, he does not notice nor does he comfort me. And my ankle still warns of every coming storm. He is never grateful for the news. But I can walk for the most part without pain or limp, and surely every miracle maker needs a witness to his work, an apostle to send letters to the future. That is my burden. It is my duty. It is my everlasting joy.

*The Tudor antiquary Bale reported that "In Avallon in 1191, there found they the flesh bothe of Arthur and of hys wyfe Guenever turned all into duste, wythin theyr coffines of strong oke, the boneys only remaynynge. A monke of the same abbeye, standyng and behouldyng the fine broydinges of the womman's hear as yellow as golde there still to remayne, as a man ravyshed, or more than halfe from his wyttes, he leaped into the graffe, xv fote depe, to have caughte them sodenlye. But he fayled of his purpose. For so soon as they were touched they fell all to powder."*

*By 1193, the monks at Glastonbury had money enough to work again on the rebuilding of their church, for wealthy pilgrims flocked to the relics and King Richard himself presented a sword reputed to be Excalibur to Tancred, the Norman ruler of Sicily, a few short months after the exhumation.* ●

BOB EITHER HAD AWFULLY BROAD SHOULDERS OR A TERRIBLY SMALL HEAD ... NO ONE WAS SURE WHICH.



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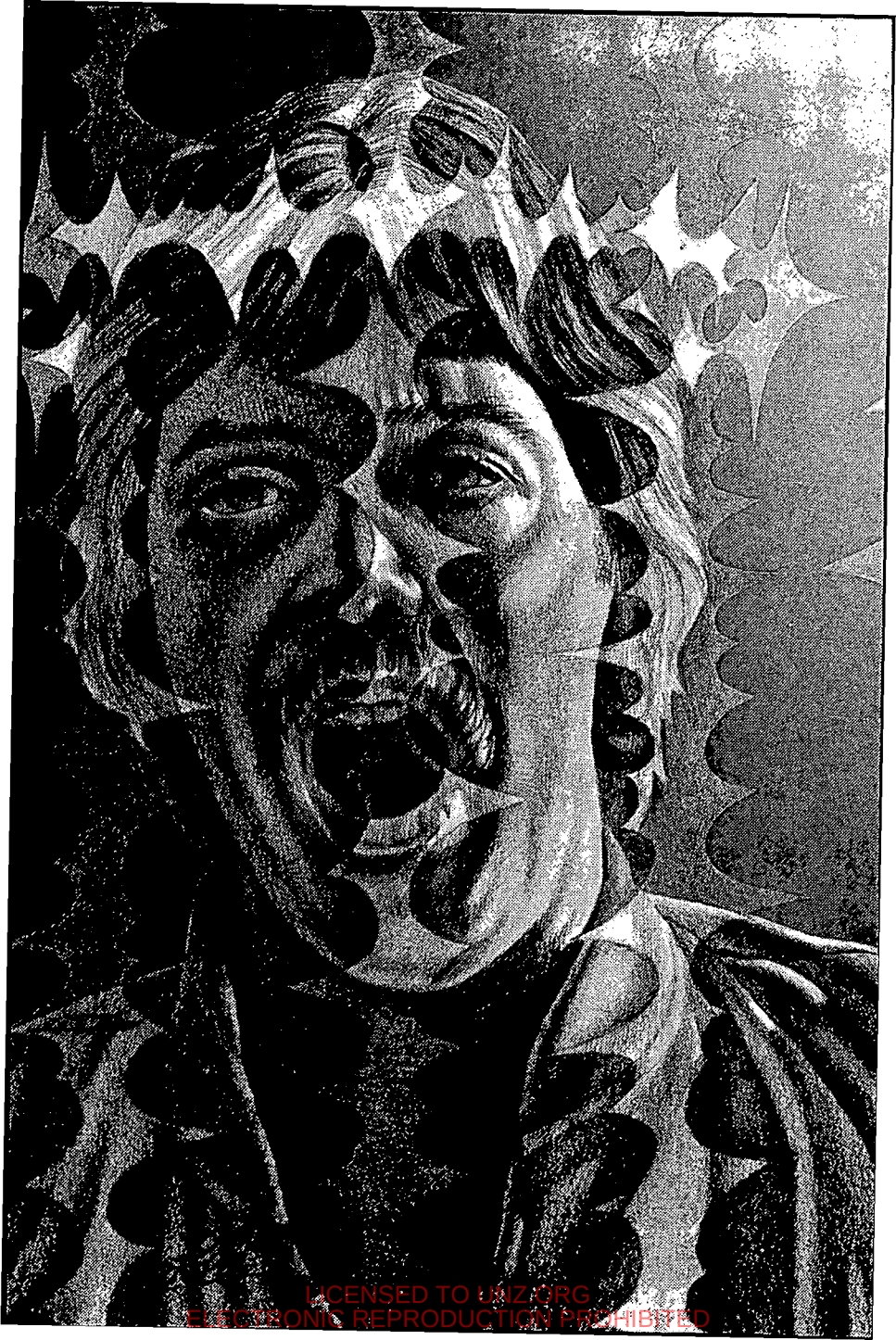

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# THE CAGE OF PAIN

by Thomas Wylde

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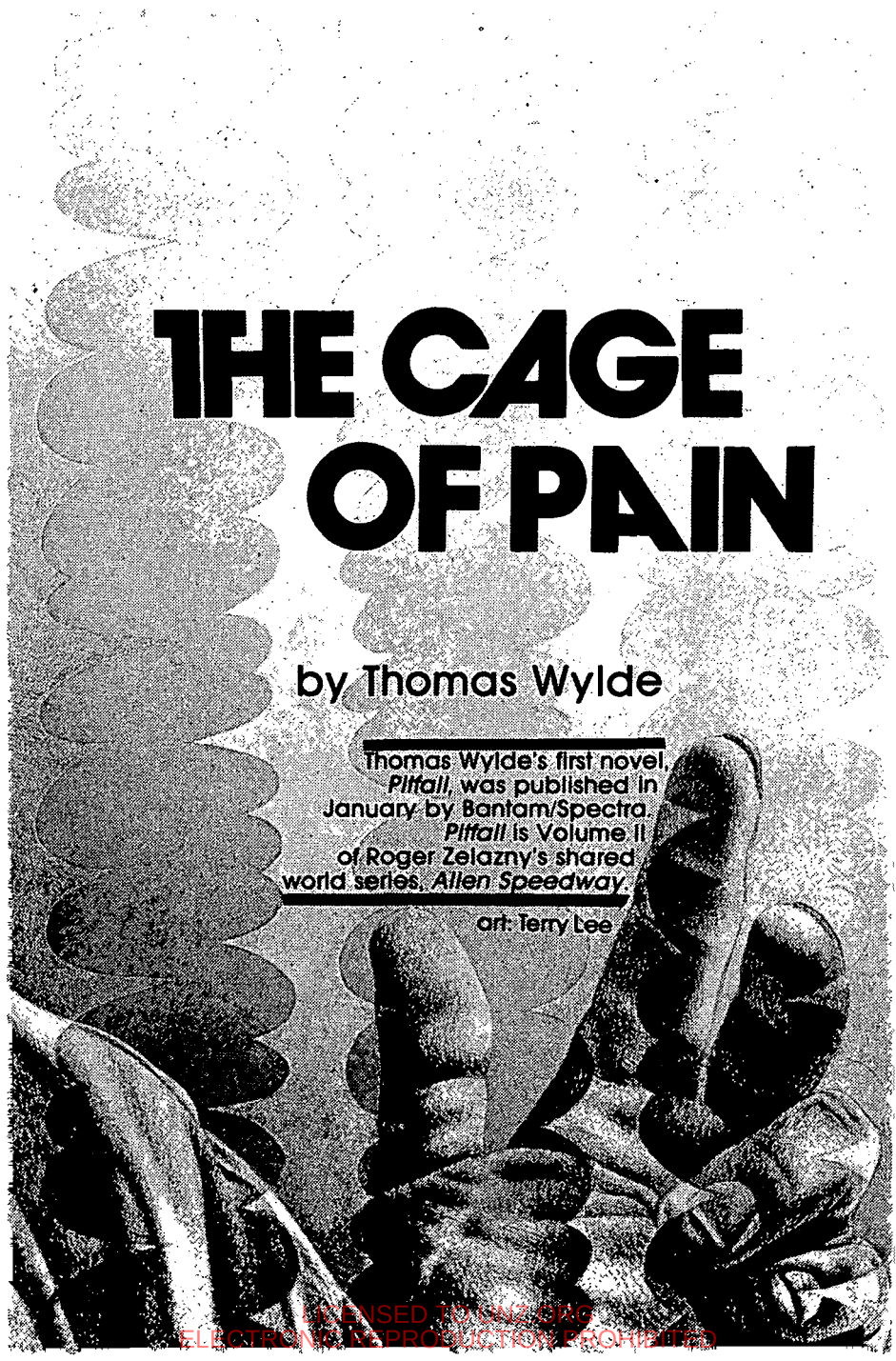
art: Terry Lee



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"You must pray, Davy," said the automatic priest. "You must pray for the swift return of Christ to the world."

"I promise, Father," said Davy.

When the timer ran down, and the priest had turned itself off, Davy left the Mission and walked down the alley, stopping to look into a trashcan whose lid was not locked. A siren started up not far away, and Davy raised his head.

A blond-haired man rounded the corner, running hard toward Davy. He tripped, dropping one of several fat paper bags as he crashed headfirst into the trashcan. He got to his feet and staggered on down the alley.

"Hey," yelled Davy, holding up the bag. "This yours?"

The man seemed confused. He fumbled with his handful of bags, then looked up, his eyes wide. The siren got loud. "Your lucky day," he yelled, disappearing around the corner.

Davy eagerly tore open the bag, but found it full of red and blue capsules. Some lucky day; he didn't even do drugs.

There was a brief whining noise up the street, then a cop car hit the ground hard, its lifters blowing dust and trash into the air. It fishtailed into the alley and smoked all six tires coming to a stop an inch from Davy's shinbones.

As the siren died away an electronic voice boomed from the cruiser. "Assume the position, punk."

Davy turned to the nearest wall, raised his arms out to his sides, and leaned forward until his forehead bounced against the gritty bricks.

The wall flared into brilliant light as the cruiser ran him through the security probes. Finally a cop got out to take a peek into the bag.

"Oh, sonny boy," he said. "You headed for the suburbs."

Davy sat on the rug while the techs finished the retrofit. It seemed the old woman who was to be his warden was having second thoughts about the pain implant.

"Don't be silly, Colleen," said her sister.

"Alice, it's my house."

"The system is perfectly safe, Mrs. Ramsay," the supervisor said. "The sensor in his neck tells this computer—" He crossed in front of Davy to the desk and put his hand on the monitor. "Tells this unit where he is in the room at all times. And if he should penetrate the safety zone—"

"Wham!" said Alice. "His head blows up!"

"Don't say that!"

"It's not quite that bad," said the supervisor. "But I guarantee he won't want to do it again."

Davy said, "I'm not going to try anything."

"Shut up, blondie," said the supervisor.



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Alice said, "What if there's a power failure?"

"There's a full battery back-up, ma'am."

She wasn't convinced. "But he's so big. What if he smashes the computer?"

"That would be the stupidest thing he could do. Remember, the satellite's always overhead."

Alice smiled. "Like a vengeful God." She seemed to like the idea very much.

Colleen Ramsay was still unsure. "But if there's an accident . . ."

The supervisor nodded impatiently. "That's why you got your panic button, lady. He gives you trouble, turn him on; he gets hung up, you turn him off."

"I don't want to hurt him." She looked at Davy, and he smiled back.

"Don't look at him," said Alice. "They're all con artists."

Mrs. Ramsay turned back to the supervisor. "Maybe I ought to think about this some more."

"It's six hundred and twenty-five bucks a month, Colleen," said Alice. "Besides, it's too late now."

The techs were leaving the room. The supervisor turned to Davy. "On your feet!" He held a little scanner against the back of Davy's neck. It felt cold.

"Is he hooked up?" asked Alice.

The man nodded. "Green light, all the way." He grinned. "Hey, blondie, feel this?"

Davy's head buzzed and his knees went weak. He tried to speak, but couldn't.

"He's all set."

When Davy's head cleared he was on his knees on the dusty rug, all alone in the room.

At the window the curtain lifted with the breeze, and he could hear the shouts of children playing in backyards across the neighborhood.

There were no bars on the window.

He opened his prison kit and dumped the clothes in a drawer of the bureau, then he went exploring.

The room was on the top floor of an old two story house. There were narrow twin beds, and between them a chair and desk, where the small monitoring computer was set up, its pale screen glowing green. By the window stood a wooden rocking chair with a tattered cushion tied to its seat.

There was a tiny bathroom built around a fat white tub that squatted on its own clawed feet. In the corner, just beyond the cold curve of the tub's thick edge, was a wooden shelf, its paint curled into flakes. Davy



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brushed the loose paint off the shelf and placed his Bible there, along with the candles and matches.

He went back to the bureau for his crucifix and leaned it against the wall at the back of the shelf. He stared at the figure of Christ for a long moment, his fingers caressing the Bible's plastic cover.

When he stowed his shaving kit in the medicine cabinet, he held back a plastic box with four aspirins. He rattled the box, measuring the painful throb in his head, then put it away. "I'll save them."

He leaned forward a moment, gazing into the mirror. His belly grew cold where the basin touched him through the thin prison clothes.

"Be good, Davy," he whispered.

Back in the bedroom he stared out the window, his head pounding. This place didn't need bars.

Colleen watched from the doorway while Alice handed Davy a plate of sliced potatoes and gravy. He smiled at her, but the old woman's expression said, "Don't waste your time, punk."

Colleen asked him, "Is that enough food?"

"It's plenty," said Alice, moving back to the door.

"Just fine, ma'am," said Davy.

The potatoes had been cooked in mushroom soup. He distrusted mushrooms, but this stuff tasted fine, and he emptied his plate while they watched. He scrubbed the plastic clean with a biscuit.

"He was so hungry," said Colleen.

"And so cute, too," said Alice, sarcastically. "Why, he couldn't possibly be a criminal, Colleen. They must have made a big mistake."

"I only said—"

"I know! Let's let him go free! Let's get a knife and dig that little thing out of his neck and let him go!"

"Oh, Alice!"

"I got no complaints," said Davy.

"Keep it that way," said Alice. She stepped close and snatched the empty plate out of his hand. "I don't want any trouble out of you."

"No, ma'am."

She held up the panic button. "I'll be watching."

"Okay," he said. "I'll be here."

The next day he sat down in front of the computer and puzzled out the instructions on the screen. Besides keeping track of his whereabouts, ready to zap him if he tried to leave the room, the computer was also to be used to do clerical work contracted for by the same company that ran the system.


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Davy was thankful he had learned to read in Church school, because this was a great chance to better himself and make some money, too.

Today he was going to be trained to fill out probation reports for ex-cons checking in on automatic teller machines. Starting tomorrow he would get to work twenty-five hours a week, at $2.20 an hour.

Federal minimum wage was $6.85, but cons were exempt. Davy didn't plan to complain—he figured it was more than he had any right to expect. Without question it was better than anything that ever happened to him on the street.

At sunset Davy sat in the rocking chair by the window and listened to the children squeezing one last game out of the day. He wished he could be out there with them. The orange light of the sun climbed the wall, dodging in and out of the shadow of the lace curtain.

After a few minutes he heard a funny noise. In the lower corner of the window, trapped between the glass and the curtain, was a fat old fly, buzzing helplessly. Davy reached out to flick the creature into the open gap beneath the window. But before his fingers reached the curtain, he heard a high-pitched tone in his head and felt an electric tingle in his knees.

He jerked his hand back, a quizzical look on his wide face. The fly continued to buzz and bounce against the glass. Davy thought for a moment, then pulled off his shoe and used it to guide the fly out the window.

He leaned back in the rocker and rubbed the scar at the nape of his neck. Little by little he was throwing off the sense of betrayal, the sting of the injustice dealt him. He had decided—without really thinking about it—to make the best of it.

Just so long as there were no more tricks. He didn't think he could forgive the world another time.

On Sunday he knelt in the bathtub in front of his candle and crucifix. "Forgive me, Father. I have sinned."

He prayed for the swift return of Christ. His mind was placid. Let the world writhe in its cage of pain. Salvation was on the way.

On the morning of the seventh day he was wakened by a commotion in the hallway. The door banged open and two uniformed cops shoved a mean-looking little man into the room.

Davy saw the swollen red line of a fresh incision running down the back of the guy's neck. His hands were tie-wrapped with a nylon strip behind his back, but he still looked pretty dangerous. He twirled around in the room, seeing and dismissing Davy in an instant.



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He yelled a garbled oath and kicked at the cops, but they just dodged and laughed. "Okay," said one, "turn him on."

The cop's partner pulled out a thing that looked like a TV remote control and pointed it at the crazy man. He pushed a button, and the guy fell to the floor.

At the same instant Davy rolled on his bed and banged his head into the wall. His body tightened in an electric grip.

"I got a big fat green light," said one of the cops.

"Test complete," said the other.

Davy blacked out.

When he woke up, the man was still conked out on the rug in the middle of the room. The cops had snipped the tie-wrap.

The guy looked about thirty-five, with short, wiry black hair. His face was creased, his eyes darting about beneath pale lids. The insides of his arms were tracked and bruised by amateur needles.

Davy got a glass of water from the bathroom. He knelt beside the guy and sprinkled his face with water. The head jerked, the eyes rolling out to stare at him. "Get away from me, faggot!"

Davy backed up to the wall and stood still. After a moment he drank the water in the glass, because he felt like a servant standing there.

The guy got up and looked around the room. He tossed his prison kit into a corner. "I guess you think you already got the good bed?"

"Take your pick."

The man smiled without a trace of humor. "Oh, really?"

He went into the bathroom, splashed water on his face, and came back out, wiping himself off with Davy's towel.

"Let me see your neck."

Davy turned, felt a strong hand grip his shoulder, twisting him this way and that.

"You got one too," the guy said, spinning Davy around. "Does it work?"

"Don't you remember?"

The guy shook his head. "No, faggot. I mean, does it work with the room? Is there really a barrier?"

Davy led him to the window and told him about the warning tingle, but the man just laughed. "Warnings are lost on a guy like me. Know what I mean?"

"No."

"The question is: what happpens if you try to leave?"

"I don't know. I'm not supposed to leave."

"Well, then," he said, winking. "Let's find out!" He grabbed Davy and shoved his head through the gap beneath the open window.

Davy's head seemed to swell and fill with hot metal, the electric pain



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lagging just behind. A dark tunnel opened before him, flickering with muted light. His knees crackled and popped, and his legs buckled.

He woke on the floor, jammed up against the wall. The guy was sitting in the rocking chair, smoking a cigarette.

Davy went to the bathroom and took two of the aspirins. In the mirror his face looked puffy and drugged, his eyes bloodshot. He filled the sink and pressed his face into the cold water. There was no towel, so he came back into the room and dripped on the rug.

The guy said, "So, it really works, huh?"

Davy said nothing.

"Call me Floyd," he said, throwing the towel. Davy caught it and dried his face off.

"Information, faggot," said Floyd. "A guy needs to know what he's up against, right?"

Davy didn't say anything.

"Weren't you even curious?"

"No."

"But what if it had been a lie? What if there wasn't no barrier? What if you could've just walked right out?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm supposed to stay here."

"Amazing," said Floyd. "What's your name, faggot?"

"Davy."

"So what's the deal, Davy? You like it here?"

"It's all right."

Floyd stared at him, his dark eyes piercing. "You know what I think? I think you're one of those religious guys. Am I right, Davy? You believe in God?"

"Yes."

"And you think God takes care of you?"

"Yes."

Floyd laughed.

Davy wadded up the towel.

"You don't belong here, Davy. You're the last guy in the world to need one of these implants."

"If I didn't have one, they wouldn't let me stay here."

"And you like it here. Yeah, I remember, Davy. I'm just saying it's a waste of hardware. For me, it's the best deal they ever made. A few hundred bucks and they got me forever. What've you got, six months? A year?"

Davy nodded.

"I'm never gonna get out of this room," said Floyd. "Unless I see an edge. All it takes is information."



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"Sure."

"I mean it," said Floyd. "One day, when we're out of this—you'll get down on your knees and thank me."

Davy didn't think so.

"Hey," said Floyd. "What's the deal on the little shrine? You holding services in the bathtub?"

"None of your business."

Floyd smiled. "I think it's real cute and all that, but if it gets in my way, I'm gonna throw it out the window. Is that okay with you?"

Davy didn't answer.

An hour later they were "settled in," Davy at the computer, and Floyd in the rocking chair by the window.

"When I was finished with it," said Floyd, "I crammed her body into a dumpster and went back across the roof to my hooch. That's another one the cops missed."

Davy nodded, but didn't look.

"Face it, kid. I'm just plain evil."

"I believe you," said Davy, not believing a word. He transmitted the finished probation report to central.

"Is that one of mine?"

"Yeah," said Davy. They alternated reports—officially. Actually, Davy did them all, but he typed in Floyd's code for every other one. The guy said he couldn't be bothered, but Davy figured he didn't know how to read.

Floyd leaned back in the rocking chair, bouncing his head lightly off the window glass. "The first guy I killed was this big son-of-a-bitch, had to be twenty-five. I was nine years old, right? Just a little squirt. And here he was this body-builder guy, had to weigh three hundred pounds."

Davy smiled. Three hundred pounds? He typed his code into the computer and waited for the next incoming report.

Floyd said, "But it don't matter how big a guy is when he's zonked out on 'ludes, you know?"

Davy glanced over. He wondered how the guy could stay like that in the warning zone. Floyd seemed to like it.

The computer chimed and Davy watched the information coming in as the ex-con on the line typed in answers to the programmed questions. Name? PIN? PO's name? Current address? Employment status?

"It was like this," said Floyd. "The guy had ripped me on a pack of Five-O. So I waited till he was snoozing away and whacked the back of his neck with a hunk of steel water pipe."

Floyd bumped his head against the glass. "Paralyzed the sucker." Davy



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looked over to see the smile he knew he'd find there. "Then I got out my little razor and went to work on the family jewels. Know what I mean?"

Davy turned back to the screen.

"He lived a while in the hospital," said Floyd. "Then I heard he begged a friend to OD him."

Davy selected some questions from the menu and had the ex-con answer them.

"Okay, if you wanna be technical, I didn't off the guy myself. But I still count him 'cause he makes it an even dozen—so far." Floyd smacked the window harder, rattling the glass. His eyes were closed. "God, this feels funny."

Davy finished the report and transmitted it. The screen lit up with an error message. He had forgotten to ask for a fax of the guy's pay stub.

By the time he could look up the "Come back to the window!" code, it was too late. The screen showed a penalty docked from Davy's account.

"Damn it," he whispered.

"This is really weird," said Floyd, his head banging the window glass.

It occurred to Davy that if he screwed up all of "Floyd's" reports, maybe they'd come and take the guy away.

But who'd keep Floyd from coming back and killing him?

"Oh, Jesus," said Floyd. "It tingles."

He leaned way back in the chair and pressed against the glass. He was breathing fast, his fingers stiff.

Davy stared until he noticed the guy was getting an erection. He looked away, then got up and went into the bathroom to wash his hands.

He could hear Floyd groaning, and he gripped the bar of soap tightly. The back of his neck was buzzing in sympathy, as if his implant were coupled to Floyd's, one tuning fork calling to another.

Davy closed the door, knelt inside the cold white tub, and prayed for Christ's swift return to the world. He stayed in the bathroom over an hour.

When Davy came out Floyd was lying on his bed, smoking a cigarette. He winked at Davy. "I recommend it."

The computer was chiming, work piling up. Davy sat back down at the desk and typed in his code.

"What do you say, Davy? You wanna try it?"

"I don't do drugs."

Floyd laughed, dropping his cigarette. While he fished for it in the folds of the blanket, he said, "Oh, Davy, you're such a weel."

"I don't care."

"No, 'cause you've got God, huh, Davy?" Floyd took a drag on his cigarette. "You know, just 'cause they don't call it a drug, don't mean it



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ain't a drug. Nicotine's a drug, and caffeine and chocolate and sugar. They're all drugs nobody wants to call drugs, 'cause too many folks are already hooked. God's a drug, too."

"Shut up."

"But that's fine with me. I like drugs. I live for drugs. Drugs are my life. Life is a drug. It's great!"

"You make me sick."

"Getting sick of folks you don't like is a drug."

Davy put questions to the ex-con on the line, but paid no attention to the answers. Floyd was smiling at him, but Davy didn't want to think about that either. It got to be a very long day.

Davy came awake, long after midnight, to the sound of someone groaning in the dark. He rolled onto his side, his eyes adjusting. Floyd's bed was empty.

He turned the other way, and saw a pale shape moving slowly in the window. Now he could hear the rhythmic tapping of the glass, and the faint creak of the rocker. Floyd breathed fast, groaning low with every puff.

For a long time Davy stared at the pale thing rocking. Stars glimmered through the window beyond, and he could hear the murmuring hiss of a distant freeway.

Davy's head floated to the pillow and the image faded. For a time he thought he was still awake, watching Floyd in the chair. Then the pale shape flickered and swelled and came close, spreading itself like a sheet that dropped over him, shutting off the light of the stars.

Davy woke in a sweat the next morning. Floyd was in his bed, snoring.

Davy got up and went into the bathroom. The tub was cold against his knees. He lit the candle and opened the Bible.

"Forgive me, Father. I have sinned."

Some time later Floyd came in to use the toilet, and Davy coughed when the smoke of the cigarette filled his lungs. He thought he heard Floyd laughing.

After breakfast Davy went to work at the computer and Floyd got back in the rocking chair, propping it up with his pillow so he could stay leaned back against the window. Davy didn't hear a peep out of him till he roused him for lunch.

Floyd stumbled about, his eyes unfocused. "Mighty fine," he said. "I recommend it."

After lunch he was back at it. Davy sat in front of the computer's insistent screen and clacked the keys.



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Living with Floyd was like living alone.

Later that evening Davy began to worry about Floyd. The little man was still pressed up against the window, and he wouldn't wake up. Sweat drenched his clothes.

Davy knew their dinners would soon arrive, and the old ladies would freak if they saw Floyd like that.

He shook the chair hard, then pried the pillow out from under the runners. He grabbed the armrests and pulled. As Davy hauled him away from the window, Floyd shuddered, his mouth opening in a silent scream. Davy got a towel from the bathroom and wiped him down, pressing the mouth closed again.

Floyd's face was almost white, his eyes rolled back, looking up, lids fluttering. Davy took hold of his stiff arm and felt at the wrist for a pulse. It was strong and fast.

He dragged the chair to the side of the bed and tumbled Floyd onto the blanket. There was a sound in the hallway, just outside the door.

He turned Floyd's face to the wall and whipped the chair back to the window, sitting down just as the door opened.

Colleen hung back while Alice brought in two smoking plates heaped with macaroni and cheese. "What's the matter with him?" she asked, putting the plates down.

"Naptime," said Davy. "I'd rather not wake him. . . . "

Alice smirked, deepening the spiderweb of lines around her mouth. "We'll have no sleeping in the middle of the day!"

She grabbed Floyd's shoulder. "Get up, punk!"

Davy said, "Wouldn't it be better to wait until—"

"Not in my sister's house!" she said, getting a handful of shirt. "How come he's so wet?"

Floyd rolled around and screamed at her. She jumped back, holding her hands in front of her chest.

He glared at her, his mouth twitching. She leaned in close and slapped his face hard.

"You filth!" she said.

"Alice!" said Colleen.

Floyd climbed to his feet on the bed, bouncing against the wall. His eyes were wide and bloody, a large red splotch darkening his cheek.

Alice swatted his knees. "You get off the bed!"

Floyd kicked at her, then jumped from the bed in a bellowing rage.

Alice made it to the door ahead of Floyd and ran down the hall just behind Colleen. When Floyd crossed the doorway his legs gave out and he banged headfirst against the wall across the hall. His body jerked, and one arm flew up, smacking the wall hard enough to crack the plaster.


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Alice was back, kicking him in the ribs, breathing hard, her voice shrill. "You punk! You vicious punk! You punks are all alike!"

Floyd was out of it, eyes clamped shut, teeth bared. His flopping legs pounded a cloud of dust from the old hall rug, and Alice began to cough. Finally she lost her balance trying to kick his moving body and fell against the wall, sobbing.

Colleen appeared, pulled her away, and began to yank Floyd's body back into the room. "Help me!"

Davy came to the doorway, already feeling the warning tingle in his head. His knees wobbled. He took a deep breath and reached out, grabbing Floyd's foot. The shoe came off in his hand, and he had to lean way forward to get another grip. His head sizzled, and he lost his balance. Floyd's knee jerked to his chest, yanking Davy far into the pain zone. An ax slammed down between his eyes, splitting his skull right to the spinal column.

He fell backward into the room, half dragging Floyd with him, and collapsed on the floor. Blearily he saw Colleen come up under Floyd's arms from the back and roll him forward through the doorway and out of the pain zone.

Then Alice showed up in the doorway with the panic button, her face ugly and dark. The last thing Davy saw was the green light flashing.

The next morning dinner sat cold on the desk, sealed in a crust to the plastic plates.

Floyd was still on the floor, zoned out, his shirt stiff with circles of dried sweat. He looked and smelled like one of the dead junkies Davy used to find in the alley. Still, he was alive, and snoring like a blast furnace.

Davy let him lie. He went into the bathroom and took the last of his aspirins. His face in the mirror looked wrecked.

Downstairs the old women were arguing loudly. Somebody was pounding the wall to make a point.

That's it, he thought. We're out of here.

When he passed the desk he noticed the computer was all lit up with a plea for somebody to log on and get to work. He shoved the disgusting plates across the desk and sat down. After a moment he shrugged and typed in his code.

He decided to pretend nothing had happened. He would work all day and wait for the ax to fall.

God's will be done, he thought.

After an hour or so—doing all the cases in his own code—Davy heard shuffling noises on the floor.


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Floyd sat up, breathing hard, and blinked in the sunlight. Without a word he crawled to the window and dragged the rocking chair out of the way. He planted his hands on the wall on either side and leaned his forehead against the glass.

He puffed and growled, his fingernails scraping furrows in the faded wallpaper, then began banging his head against the window, harder and harder, until the glass cracked.

Davy went over, grabbed the greasy neck of Floyd's shirt, and pulled him away from the window. He dropped the whimpering body on the floor and went back to work at the computer.

Half an hour later Floyd roused himself and went back to the window. Davy finished the case he was on and came around the bed. "Okay," he said. "You want this so bad."

He took hold of Floyd's head and shoved it through the open window—taking the zap in his skull as his hands penetrated the invisible barrier. He held his breath until he couldn't stand the pain any longer, then jerked Floyd's head back and threw the body down.

"Now we're even," he said.

This time it took Floyd two hours to wake up, and by then Davy was sure they were history in this house.

Floyd sprawled on the floor, mumbling. Davy got up and dribbled a glass of water on his face. While Floyd sputtered and groaned, Davy said: "Proud of yourself? You just got us kicked out of here."

Then the door swung open. Alice marched in, retrieved the dinner plates, and went out.

"See?" said Davy. "She's pissed at us."

Floyd was still unable to speak. His eyes glittered.

"I hope it was fun," said Davy.

He left him on the floor and went back to the computer. He might as well put in a full day's work. If he looked real clean, maybe they'd let him stay.

Floyd finally got up and went into the bathroom. Davy heard water splashing into the tub. For the next half hour Floyd rummaged noisily in the tub. Davy kept working, an occasional smile twitching his lips.

Oh, fine, he thought, Now he's addicted to soap and water.

By dinner time Floyd was dressed in clean clothes and sitting in the rocking chair. His hair was shiny and wet; it dripped down his neck, but he didn't seem to notice. He no longer even tried to speak.

Davy was astonished when Alice brought dinner. She dropped the plates on the desk and went out.

He didn't know what to think. Were they getting kicked out or what?


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He handed one of the plates to Floyd, but the guy didn't show any interest, would not even take it from Davy's hand.

"It'll be on the desk if you want it later," he said.

He sat down in front of the computer, shoved it aside, and ate the chow. Floyd's silence was beginning to annoy him.

After dinner Davy went into the bathroom to see if Floyd had made a mess of his shrine.

The stubby candle was burning and the Bible was open, with lumps in the paper where water had dropped. The crucifix had slipped down, resting on two points, looking as if Christ were caught in the middle of a complicated high dive.

Davy righted the cross and dried the book. Then he climbed into the wet tub and got onto his knees. "Forgive me, Father. I have sinned."

When he was done he blew out the candle and closed the Bible. As he left the room he heard a faint scraping noise. The crucifix had again slipped, sliding down the wall until one arm of the cross touched the shelf. Davy went back and laid it out flat.

Hours later Floyd cleared his throat. Davy looked over. It was dark outside, and Davy was watching "Star Trek" on the computer monitor. He had the sound down real low.

Floyd was making wet noises with his mouth. He took several deep breaths and hissed them out. Finally he said, "Davy . . . "

"I'm here."

"Davy . . . "

"What?!"

"Davy . . . "

"Oh, shut up."

"I am an evil man, Davy."

"Sure, Floyd."

Floyd climbed out of the chair. "You hear me, faggot?"

Davy nodded, afraid to breathe.

Floyd crawled over Davy's bed. He banged the monitor. "It's the truth!" Floyd snapped off the set and stood hovering over Davy in the sudden dark. "Oh, man, the things I've seen . . . You ever wonder what hell is really like? Just ask me. I been there."

Davy was nervous and turned on the desk lamp. Floyd didn't flinch when the harsh light hit his face. His eyes looked dead.

"I saw the evil husk that surrounds my soul, saw it catch fire in the darkest pit of hell."

He squeezed Davy's neck, using a fingernail to scratch out the line of


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the incision. It hurt, and Davy jerked back and forth, but the little man's grip was overpowering.

"It's a doorway, Davy," said Floyd. "It's a tunnel into hell . . . and out again. I can lead you through."

"Don't do me any favors."

Floyd just smiled. "Come on."

"Come on where?"

Floyd slapped Davy's scar. "To meet your maker."

He grabbed Davy's shirt and pulled him across the bed. "We'll walk right out of here," he said, dragging him toward the window. "Right through the pain. This is the edge I was telling you about. We're gonna burn the pain, Davy. We're gonna burn it out."

Davy squirmed in terror, his stomach turning over. "No, Floyd, please! I'm going to be sick!"

"You wanna see God, you gotta suffer," said Floyd, backing into the warning zone. "Right?" Without hesitation he ducked under the window and leaned on the sill.

Davy closed his eyes. A vibration tingled in his neck and grew outward in electric heat, filling his body with gripping pain. He couldn't breathe and tried to pull away—but Floyd had found incredible strength in the zone of pain.

Davy's feeble legs scuffed the floor, then went limp. Floyd lifted him off the ground and hauled him into the zone.

When Davy's forehead touched the window frame a brilliant white light exploded in his face. He opened his mouth to scream, but could make no sound. He felt helpless, like a patient spread upon a table; he was opened, scrutinized, judged. He tried to pray, but his mind went blank in the radiance of that terrible light.

There was no God for him in that harsh glare, no road that led anywhere, no possibility of salvation—just the corroding furnace of electric pain.

He woke in a large room with pale green walls and bars on the windows. His wrists were tie-wrapped to the steel sides of the bed. He knew at once it was the prison's hospital ward.

He was not alone. Some men slept, others talked quietly, one man howled and whimpered. Across the aisle was a man who seemed to glow with inner calm. He smiled at Davy, then stared at the ceiling as if he could see right through it.

Davy twisted, cursing the pain of his fettered hands. He closed his eyes and prayed for the swift return of Christ.

After an hour a fat man in a white coat came up to Davy's bed. He



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held out a yellow disk of hard candy. "For your throat," he said, unwrapping it.

Davy closed his eyes and took it into his dry mouth. He whispered, "Corpus Christi."

"You're all right," the guy said, reaching down to snip the nylon straps. "It's just a simple case of food poisoning. We pumped your stomach and took a blood sample for the federal lab. Nothing serious."

"Poison . . . "

"Yeah, well, apparently there was some problem with your landlady—or her sister, I guess it was. Mugged a couple times, holding a grudge, that sort of thing. But now the lady's gone, and everything's fine. You'll be going back tonight."

Davy cleared his throat painfully. "What about—"

"The other guy's fine. They took a blood sample, but I can't see there was much point. His dinner was untouched."

"Did they see his eyes?" asked Davy, but the man was already moving away.

Colleen Ramsay showed the cops where to take him. "I'm so terribly sorry," she said. She was alone in the house.

When the door opened Davy saw Floyd sitting in the rocking chair, leaned back into the zone, his expression blank. The cops activated Davy's implant and went away.

Davy sat on the floor next to the door and watched Floyd. When nothing happened for a long time he closed his eyes, but he could still see Floyd's face.

Davy woke suddenly to the sound of heavy footsteps coming up the stairs. He jumped to his feet and looked at Floyd.

The little man was still in the chair, but now he was grinning. Davy moved closer, charmed by the man's sudden friendliness. "Welcome back!" Davy said, then stopped. Floyd was staring past him.

"All right, you two!"

Davy spun around, startled. There was a man in the doorway holding a small plastic box. "It's probably not important," he said, "but they sent me out to get another blood sample from each of you."

"Blood . . . " whispered Floyd.

The guy crossed to the desk and opened the box. He tore open a cellophane wrapper and assembled a syringe. "Just take a minute," he said, motioning for Davy to come over.

"What's wrong with our blood?" asked Davy.

"Just a screw up in the lab. You first? Come on."



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Davy hesitated, looking back at Floyd, who had fixed his eyes on the tech. There was something sinister about Floyd's unmoving grin.

"Come on, come on!" said the tech.

Davy went slowly over and sat in the desk chair, facing away from Floyd. The tech ripped open an alcohol wipe and swabbed the inside of Davy's right arm. He tied a rubber cord around the biceps, and reached for the syringe.

"What kind of screw up?" asked Davy, watching the needle go in.

The guy pulled on the plunger of the syringe, drawing purplish red blood from the arm. "Just something weird. Are you David?"

Davy nodded, and the guy said, "Mostly it's your partner there. Some kind of brain chemical in the blood. You ever heard of beta endorphin?"

Davy shook his head. The guy whipped off the rubber cord and pulled the needle out. He wiped the spot with the alcohol swab, and folded the arm back. "Hold it like that."

He marked the blood sample and put it away, then he unwrapped a band-aid. "Simply stated, the brain knows how to manufacture its own pain-killing drugs. The more pain you're in, the more junk it makes." He pressed the band-aid over the puncture.

"You found junk in our blood?"

"Yeah, we did. Mostly him," he said, gesturing. He stopped and stared at Floyd. Davy didn't have to look back. He could see on the tech's face that Floyd was watching them.

The man went on. "There was some other stuff, too. Something like LSD, something nobody'd ever seen before we started testing you implant guys."

He flashed a light in and out of Davy's eyes. "You nice folks aren't dropping acid in here, are you?"

Davy blinked, shaking his head.

"What about your friend? He looks good and fried."

Davy could hear Floyd shifting around on the creaking chair. Floyd said, "I am the body of evil."

The man looked at Floyd for a moment, then he smiled. "Is that what your friends call you?"

Davy turned, saw Floyd get slowly to his feet.

"Maybe you'd better come out here," said Mrs. Ramsay.

Davy scrambled from the chair. He hadn't realized she was standing in the doorway. He was looking at her when he felt something cold on his neck. He spun around. The tech was standing there with a small black meter in his hand. A green light dimly glowed; a yellow one flickered.

"I've seen better readings."

"I didn't do anything," said Davy.


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"Please, *doctor*," said Colleen. "Come out."

"Look at me!" commanded Floyd, stretching out his arms, fingers crossed. There were pentagrams drawn on his palms of his hands. "I am the Antichrist."

Davy couldn't take his eyes off him. The tech said, "You are the Asshole, more like it."

Floyd hissed.

"Please!" said Mrs. Ramsay.

The tech said, "Get away from the window, punk."

Floyd moved slowly forward, revealing the broken panes. Davy heard the tech mutter, "Oh, shit . . . " He pointed to Davy. "Go stand in the corner. Unless you're in this . . . " Davy just stared, his head slowly shaking. "Move!"

Davy moved, throwing himself into the far corner beside the bathroom door.

"Come close to me," Floyd told the tech. "I want to show you something."

The man hesitated a moment, then moved swiftly across the room and raised the black box to Floyd's discolored neck. Davy felt a tingle in his skull and saw the red light flashing in the tech's hand. Floyd cocked his head quizzically.

The tech's gaze swept the room, desperate for a way out. Floyd reached over and flicked the black box out of his hand.

"I am the Antichrist," he explained.

In one swift motion he seized the man's throat and squeezed. Colleen screamed, and Davy grabbed Floyd from behind. "Let him go!"

The tech's silent face grew dark, his eyes bulging. Davy pried and pulled and pounded on Floyd's stiff arms. It was no use. The little man was hard as a rock.

The room lit up, and Davy fell to the floor, his body on fire. Mrs. Ramsay stood in the doorway, the panic button flashing in her hand. Davy curled up and rolled to his knees, pressing his face into the musty rug. All he could hear was Floyd's contemptuous laugh.

Abruptly the pain stopped, and Davy looked up. Colleen threw down the little box and ran away. Davy could hear the stairs creak as the old woman scampered down.

Floyd dropped the tech's limp body to the floor. He went to the doorway and looked out. Downstairs the front door banged open.

"Cops'll be on the way," said Floyd. He stepped calmly into the hallway, into the furnace of the zone of pain. "Time to go, Davy."

Davy hung back at the door, his scalp prickling. "You do what you want."

"There is nothing to fear, Davy."


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"The pain . . . "

"I will devour your pain."

Floyd stood in the dark hallway, smiling with teeth as white as polished ivory. There was a glow in his eyes.

"Who are you?" asked Davy.

"I am the feast of blood. Bow down." Davy just stared at him. Floyd lashed out and yanked Davy to his knees, pushing his forehead to the gritty hardwood. "Bow down!"

Davy's body tingled and stiffened with electric pressure. "Oh, God, it burns!"

"You are my first disciple," Floyd said, standing up. There was a dark trickle of blood rolling down his neck. "See how easy it is?" He smiled, and Davy's heart sped up, seeing the power in the man's eyes.

"Together," said Floyd. "Together we will rule creation."

Davy crawled blindly forward, drawn to the horrible power. Floyd nodded. "It is done."

Suddenly his head snapped back. His jaw quivered and he groaned, his fists clenched white. Then his head dropped down. He looked confused, his eyes glittering with tears.

"It's gone," he said. He reached up and slapped himself on the back of the neck. "There's nothing there!"

For several seconds he just stood there, pathetic and vulnerable, staring at the fading pentagram on his bloody hand. Then he exploded through the doorway, knocking Davy over. He grabbed the panic button off the floor and pressed it to his forehead. The light came on, and Davy slumped in pain.

Floyd scraped the control box all around his head and neck, pressing the button repeatedly. With a shriek he slammed it to the floor and crushed it under his shoe. Davy rolled to a sitting position.

Floyd whirled, saw the computer on the desk. "What's the matter with it?!"

Davy sprang up and grabbed him. Floyd struggled, turned and smacked Davy across the face. "It's gone!"

They tumbled across the outside bed, landing on the floor in front of the desk. Floyd squirmed and kicked, screaming in rage. Davy banged his head on the floor, then dragged him to his feet. "I got on my knees!"

"Fuck you!" said Floyd.

Davy's face burned. He couldn't breathe. His fingers tore at the back of Floyd's neck, splitting the bloody incision wide. "You tricked me!"

The little man laughed.

Davy yelled and wrapped Floyd's face in his arms, smothering that awful laugh. He twisted with all his might, heard the neck crackle, then


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smashed Floyd's head against the desk, crushing the computer. He threw the body to the floor and stood over it, breathing hard.

Down the hall an alarm had begun to ring. Davy looked at the pieces of the wrecked computer, and vague words of warning passed just beyond his comprehension.

He held his breath, listening. From far above him came a sizzling noise, like fat tossed on a smoking griddle, then his head filled with stinging wasps. He dropped to his knees beside Floyd. "God, forgive me. . . ."

The furnace ignited in his spine, and he twisted, falling onto Floyd's body. The walls began to ripple and flow, hissing with the light of the fire that scoured his blood.

Then, from beyond the flames and the pain and the crackling roar of the furnace, came a light of aching purity. Brighter and brighter it grew, a cool luminescence that filled the room. The burning pain fast diminished, became a thrilling pulse that spread tingling from his loins. He filled his lungs with the sudden sweetness of the air.

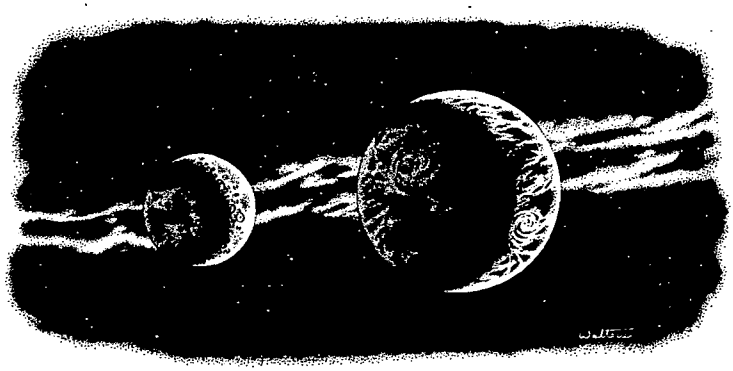
The walls of the house dissolved away. Beyond lay the writhing city, and all the hopeless people there, stuck fast to the world and wallowing in sin. Here in the heart of the cage of pain, there was work to be done.

He blinked, and the walls returned. He saw the body of the medical man, his face dark and lifeless. Davy smiled and thought: I can fix that.

He turned to stare out the window at the wide world beyond. Darkness approached, and the stars glimmered in the violet sky.

Overhead God beamed down His luminous love. Alice had been wrong. He was not a vengeful God.

"Behold, Father," said Davy. "I am come again." ●





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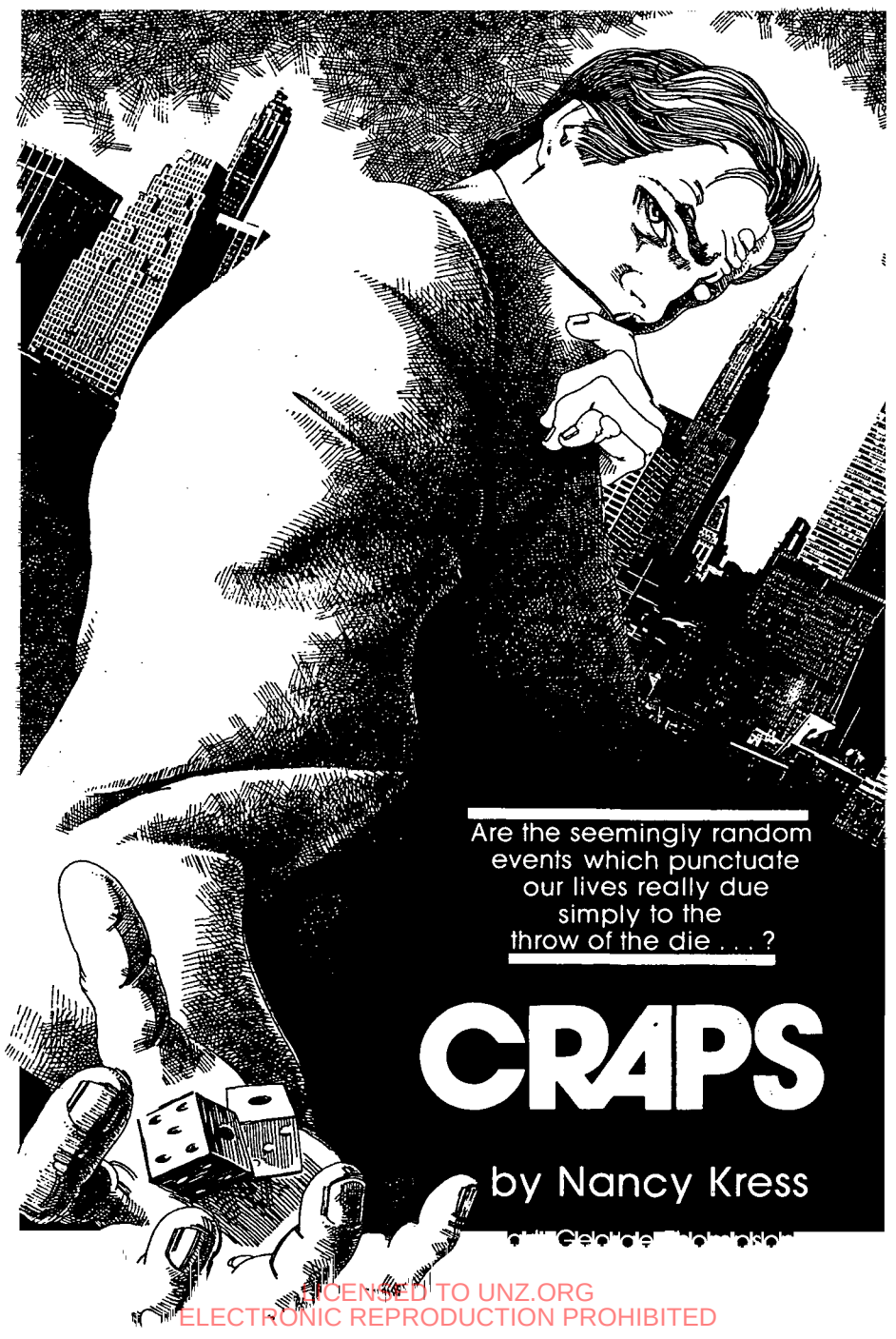


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*I shall never believe that God plays dice with the world.*

—Albert Einstein

*Gotta have the game or we'll die of shame.*

—Nathan Detroit

Charlie Foster was doing lunch with a client at the Burrowing Fern when he choked on a chunk of broccoli al dente in the Fettucine Primavera. His throat and chest spasmed painfully but he nonetheless tried to smile reassuringly at the client, Marv Spanmann of Spanmann Associates, who thought Charlie was having trouble with a partial bridge and so tactfully excused himself to the men's room. With Marv gone, Charlie batted himself on the chest while swallowing hard. When that didn't work he stood up, knocking over an unoccupied chair, clawing at the air and pointing to his throat. "My God," said someone at the next table, "that man's choking!"

The Heimlich maneuver, even as performed by a massive Swedish bartender, didn't help. However, some air must have been getting through the broccoli because Charlie didn't lose complete consciousness. Someone called an ambulance. Charlie staggered forward, knocking over two more chairs and an order of Chicken Greco. Marv Spanmann returned from the men's room and knelt by Charlie, now gasping on the floor, to say, "Don't worry, Chuck, whatever happens, you've definitely got the account!" Women moaned; a siren screamed.

In the ambulance Charlie kept trying to breathe, huge futile gasps that tossed his body from side to side and sent up waves of garlic from the spilled Chicken Greco. The paramedic was still trying to strap him down when the ambulance collided with a silver Mercedes Benz at the corner of Broad and Exchange. The impact dislodged the broccoli and sent it flying against the back windshield. Charlie sucked in air.

The paramedic, after making sure that normal color had returned to Charlie's fingernails, jumped out of the back of the ambulance. The driver of the Mercedes stood with his fists raised, shouting at the ambulance driver, who shrugged. The passenger door of the Mercedes was folded on itself like sloppy origami. Its owner, still shouting, reached inside for a winged corkscrew and used it to gouge the hood of the ambulance, right above the grill.

Shaky, Charlie stood up and poked at the piece of broccoli, which lay on the ambulance floor just inside the open back door. The broccoli was slimed with saliva flecked with blood. A small boy in a Pepsi cap peered into the ambulance to see if anyone inside happened to be dead; Charlie glared and the small face disappeared.

Leaving the broccoli, Charlie slowly climbed out of the ambulance in time to see the paramedic lunge at the owner of the Mercedes, trying to



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take the corkscrew away from him. The ambulance driver circled behind the struggling pair, grabbed the Mercedes owner, and pinned his arms against his body. The paramedic yanked away the corkscrew and immediately began asking witnesses for their names and addresses. The Mercedes owner shouted incoherently. Charlie caught a cab and went home.

"Well, that was certainly a freak accident," Charlie's wife Patti said. She didn't sound especially interested, once she had learned that Charlie was all right. Slim and blonde, with the pale polished look of an opal, Patti nonetheless had a growing reputation in the field of subatomic particle physics. Her degrees were from Stanford, she interned at the Fermi Lab, and her IQ was 163. Over the years of their marriage, which had begun when they were both undergraduates, Charlie had grown unadmittedly afraid of her. They had no children.

"Well, I think it was more than a freak," Charlie said. "These things don't just *happen*." He had no idea what he meant.

Patti looked at him a long moment. Then she put her arms around him, cool arms in a sleeveless summer dress. "You didn't get enough attention for your brush with death . . . poor baby!"

"It doesn't matter," Charlie mumbled, heard himself lying, and added with energy, "It's just that these things don't just happen!"

"Only to you," Patti said, smiled, and let him go to return to her notebooks full of precise mathematical symbols the convoluted shapes of broccoli.

Marv Spanmann kept his word and gave the Spanmann account, a quarterly newsletter plus promotion film and four-color brochure, to Charlie's agency. The job would bill at least $125,000, and Charlie's boss, who had been writing a government manual all week, made several hearty jokes about impressing clients with simulated asphyxiation in trendy yuppie restaurants (SATYR). The junior copywriter, art director, and secretary all laughed. Charlie, however, felt that his own laughter was curiously forced, which embarrassed him. He avoided further discussion of his accident.

Three days later, he decided to walk home from work. Patti was in Chicago at a scientific conference. The city summer was in full, hot, rich swing. Women pushed past in sandals and pastel skirts, carrying shopping bags with bright logos. Store window mannequins held tennis rackets perpetually upraised. The air swelled redolent with potted flowers, street-repair machinery, hot pretzels and hotter pavement. Jackhammers and rock music mingled with the insistent braking of overcrowded buses. Over it all lay the golden, dusty light of late afternoon. Charlie,


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who twenty years before and for no discernible reason had been an anthropology major, thought confusedly of the vital, brawling cities of ancient Sumeria, and tried to remember where Sumeria was.

At the corner of Main and Clark stood the Cathedral of the Holy Name, a vast dark pile of cool stone. The bushes beneath the cathedral windows hadn't been pruned; they straggled over the sills and up the massive walls. Charlie shaded his eyes and leaned back his head to see the place where the top of the cathedral spire pierced the sky. A brick dislodged from the architrave below the spire and fell straight toward him.

The brick seemed to fall too fast for him to dodge, yet slow enough for him to think, "Well—now this is it." But it wasn't. A huge pigeon flew from behind Charlie, crashed into the falling brick, and died instantly. Brick and pigeon deflected from their previous trajectories. The brick missed Charlie by three inches, shattering on the pavement into subbricks which bounded and ricocheted, although not off him. The pigeon hit the sidewalk in a bloody splat and lay there looking at Charlie from black eyes. Fine red brick dust settled over his shoes.

Charlie lowered himself to sit in the middle of the sidewalk. A woman rushed up to him to ask if he were hurt. A bearded young man carrying a Walkman sprinted up the cathedral steps and began to pound on the wooden door, demanding someone in authority. A man pressed upon Charlie a business card, which said: MARTIN CASSIDY—ATTORNEY AT LAW—LITIGATION SPECIALIST. Charlie put the card in his vest pocket and looked up at the woman. She had a plain, middle-aged face furrowed with concern.

He said simply, "That was divine intervention."

Immediately the concern left the woman's face. Her eyes, chin, mouth, and eyebrows all wavered into suspicion: of his sanity, of her own involvement. Charlie saw the change and tried to laugh. The laugh was shaky, but he fortified it with a humorous, self-mocking shrug that he often used to good effect with clients who had come up through the manufacturing ranks and so suspected ad agencies of superciliousness. The woman seemed reassured. She helped Charlie to his feet. He looked once more at the cathedral, the particles of brick, and the dark unfathomable eyes of the dead pigeon, and over him went a shudder which he did not understand but which, in some way he also did not understand, pleased the part of him that had wondered about Sumeria.

"Books?" Patti said.

"Books," Charlie said. They stood at their kitchen counter, Patti chewing on a strip of leftover take-out sushi, regarding the pile of library books. She wrinkled her nose.

"They smell as if nobody has ever taken them out before."



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"The pages on this one aren't even cut," Charlie said. His voice was pleased. He touched the top book on the pile. Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Francisco Sanchez, Nicolas Malebranche, George Berkeley. Patti sighed.

"Are you really going to read all this philosophy?"

"I certainly am!"

"Why?"

"I need to."

" 'Need to'? Charlie, a good well-written detective novel has more to offer."

"More what?" Charlie said. She didn't answer right away, and Charlie felt a sudden, secret flush of confidence that let him say, "There's a strangeness underlying the universe, Patti. We don't pay enough attention to it!"

Patti stopped chewing. Old resentment rose in her eyes. She said quietly, "*I* do. I pay attention to what underlies the universe every day of my working life. It's you that's never paid much attention, no matter how important I said it was to me."

"I don't mean subatomic particles," Charlie said, more impatiently than he intended. Something about the way she looked had begun to scare him again.

"That's what there is."

"No," Charlie said. Patti put down her sushi and turned away. Charlie felt a sudden flood of anger, of tenderness, of manic scorn. She didn't understand. She thought the whole world could be verified by equations, reduced to electrons and neutrinos. She thought . . . she only thought. She hadn't choked on a piece of broccoli and been rescued by an ambulance crash, she hadn't been caught in the improbability of a falling brick and witnessed the greater improbability of a dead pigeon, she hadn't glimpsed the underlying strange . . . whatever the hell it was.

"Just remember," Patti said suddenly, viciously, "you work in *advertising*."

Charlie gaped at her. Even Patti seemed abashed by the spiteful energy of this attack. She put on her most remote and polished expression, the one with which she addressed scientific colloquies, and stared at him. Charlie felt a tingling up and down his spine; in some way he didn't understand, he had won. He was free of the rein of her scientific judiciousness; she had freed him herself, by the petty nastiness of her words. No one for whom the probabilities of the world had bent—*twice*—could be touched by something so small. What had happened to him was too powerful, too rich, too important.

He smiled at her with pity.

* * *



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The books, however, were a disaster. In Berkeley's *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge,* Charlie read:

> It may perhaps be objected that if extension and figure exist only in the mind, it follows that mind is extended and figured; since extension is a mode or attribute which is predicated of the subject in which it exists. I answer those qualities are in the mind only as they are perceived by it—that is, not by way of mode or attribute, but only by way of idea.

Charlie read this twice, three times. He read it after a shower to refresh his mind. He read it after a good night's sleep; after a gin-and-tonic; after a brisk walk. After he had read it for the eleventh time, on a Wednesday evening, Charlie packed up all the books and walked them back to the library.

He slid Berkeley and Duns Scotus into the after-hours book dump with the same sense of rich freedom with which he had faced Patti. The books didn't know. Dry words, intellectual gymnastics, earnest and desperate superiority of just exactly the same type as the broccoli-shaped symbols in Patti's notebook. Just exactly. He was already beyond that. He *knew.* Charlie closed the metal flap on the book dump and began to whistle Beethoven. The night was cold, the sky sullen; Charlie didn't notice. He walked home in his T-shirt, gooseflesh and Beethoven's *Fifth.* When a Buick coming around the corner at Canal Street, right after the movie let out, missed him by five inches, he stopped and stared at it with eyes wider than those of the terrified teenage girl driving without the permission of either her father or the state of New York.

"Did I hurt you? Oh, God, did I hurt you?"

Charlie grinned at her. He couldn't stop grinning. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his life, long blond hair and tender skin, black leather jacket and obscene T-shirt. "You didn't hurt me."

"Are you sure? I didn't even see you! I just came around the corner and—if you're okay?"

"I'm fine," Charlie said. "I'm wonderful. I'm glad it happened."

The girl stared at him. Her friend in the car, less spectacular except for four pairs of rhinestone earrings dangling from her ears, rolled down the window to listen.

Charlie kept on grinning. "But this was only normal, you know. Not a sign. Only normal."

The girl got back into the car and released the hand brake. Charlie wanted to yell "Thank you," knew he had already said more than enough, knew that the girl had smelled whiskey on his breath, knew she had misunderstood utterly. It didn't matter. He settled for waving after the moving Buick.


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"Guy is fucking crazy," the girl muttered, and laid rubber the length of Canal Street.

In the morning, sober, he thought that he had probably behaved like a fool. He was probably thinking like a fool. Brushing his teeth, knotting his tie, he told himself his thinking was bizarre: he was having temporal-lobe electrical spasms, was having a mid-life crisis, was having stress manifestations, was having all the pop-psych clichés he could drag up from airport paperback racks and *Phil Donahue*. None of it touched him. The feeling of exultation from the night before, of freedom and strangeness in the world, would not leave him. He smiled at people in the lobby at work; he tore into the script of the employee training film for Fullman Foods; he answered eight phone messages and evaded no calls.

"Someone's in a good mood," the secretary said.

Charlie laughed. "Do you believe in chance, Carol?"

"Of course. I buy a lottery ticket every Tuesday."

Charlie laughed again. A lottery ticket! He leaned close to Carol's face, thick with powder and eyeshadow, and said, "I'll tell you a secret. *God does play dice with the world.*"

"What?"

"God does play dice with the world. The rules aren't locked in. Everyday reality is only one side of it. Anything could happen, anything at all."

Carol frowned. "You mean, like, I could end up rich?"

"You could end up the queen of Sumeria! All you have to do is *see* it! There is something making its own decisions out there after all, something as real as this fucking desk!"

Her mouth pursed. "I don't really appreciate that sort of language, Mr. Foster."

"Oh, Carol," he said gently. She watched him, frowning, all the way into his office. When he came out two hours later, after having accomplished more work than in any two hours of his life, she watched him again. He walked into the elevator with his boss and the art director. As soon as the elevator door closed, there was a grinding screech. The elevator plummeted six floors to the basement. Both the art director and Charlie's boss were killed. Charlie staggered out of the elevator without a scratch.

Three elevator company engineers said his survival was a million-to-one interaction of vectors. Two insurance company doctors said it was an unprecedented medical precedent. Charlie sat in the hospital emergency room after he had been checked over by the incredulous staff, waiting for the dead men's wives and parents to arrive to claim the bodies, and stared at the wall without blinking once.

* * *



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Patti was patient. She sat close to him on a gurney against one wall of the emergency room, held his hand, and rubbed her thumb in slow circles on his palm. "Listen, Charlie, it happens. They died, darling, and you didn't. We all feel guilty when that happens, there's even a name for it: 'survivors' guilt.' Please don't do this to yourself . . . "

"You don't understand," Charlie said. "It's all right. I don't feel guilty."

"No?"

"No. I feel ready."

Patti stopped moving her thumb. "Ready for what?"

"I don't know yet."

"Charlie . . . "

"It wouldn't be for nothing. Not after all this trouble. The broccoli, the brick, the elevator . . . not for nothing."

"*Charlie*—"

"I can wait. Now that there's something to wait for. Rolling dice don't have rules, but they have outcomes."

Patti caught her breath. She peered at Charlie, but he caught her at it and smiled, a smile so lucid and tender she was confused all over again. The wife of the dead art director, stumbled into the emergency room, her eyes enormous and her face streaked with tears. Charlie walked over to meet her, gait steady and arms outstretched, while Patti sat biting her lip at the edge of the cot from which her husband had just arisen.

In the next few months, Charlie became the mainstay of the agency, and the wonder of the city's advertising grapevine. He took on his boss's work and his own, handling both so efficiently that in October he was made a partner. Every Sunday he and Patti took the widow of the art director and her two small children on an outing: for a walk in a park, to the beach, to a children's matinee of *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp*. The genie rose up to grant Aladdin three wishes, and the youngest child burst into terrified tears. Charlie consoled him with a Mars bar he had thought to bring in his vest pocket, and Patti looked admiring at his prescience.

People began to comment on Charlie's steadiness, his gentleness, how well he had come through the accident. He took up squash, lost fifteen pounds, and began beating men ten years younger on the court. He was a gracious winner, a better loser.

In November he and Patti celebrated their wedding anniversary in Palermo, where she was giving a paper on muon trajectories. Charlie attended her presentation and was grave and interested. At the reception afterward her colleagues found themselves impressed with her husband, despite his occupation. He avoided so effortlessly all the embarrassments of superfluous spouses at learned gatherings: he neither competed, nor



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sulked, nor faded into corners. While Patti accepted her congratulations—it was an important paper—he held her hand and smiled. Afterwards, he discussed the road system in Sicily with neither condescension nor nervous humor.

"He is a nice man, your husband," Patti was told by a French scientist with whom she had once contemplated an affair, "but he looks always as if he is waiting for something, *n'est-ce pas?* Do you know what it is?"

Patti froze. But she watched Charlie, and he seemed to her happier than ever before, and since she was happy, too, she forgot about it. When the conference ended, they went to Paris. They visited Saint-Chapelle, gorged themselves at patisseries, bought secondhand prints along the Seine, and made love every night.

In March Patti discovered she was pregnant. She and Charlie held long conversations about commitment and career choices and biological clocks, and decided to have the baby. "You'll make a good father," she told Charlie. "You really will."

The baby was due in December. Patti and Charlie bought a house in a suburb with a good school system, closed in September, and moved. All October, when even the downtown streets swirled with gold and yellow leaves, Charlie worked on the house. He pruned arbor vitae, sealed the driveway, cleaned the gutters. He grew quieter, but not enough for Patti, absorbed in both pregnancy and pions, to notice.

She was driving home from her lab when one of the sudden electrical storms common to upstate October hit hard. Leaves blew in great rainy gusts against the windshield and were dragged across it by the wipers. Thunder crashed, at first a full minute behind the lightning, but the lag shortened rapidly and then the storm was directly overhead, cacophony and strobe. Saplings seemed bent nearly double by the sheer pressure of sound. Patti drove slowly, turning into her driveway with relief. Jagged cloud-to-ground lightning exploded to her right. She decided to stay in the car until the center of the storm passed.

Through the water streaming across the windshield she saw Charlie open the side door of the house. He walked bent forward against the wind, with the slow portentousness of a man moving underwater. He wore jeans, a red sweatshirt, and canvas loafers. It seemed to take a long time for him to cross the yard, heading toward the only large tree on the Fosters' new property, a forty-foot sycamore whose branches flailed around the trunk like knotted scourges.

Patti put her hand on the inside door handle. Charlie tipped his head back so far it seemed he must lose his balance and slowly put his hand on the trunk of the tree. Lightning flared, followed a nearly imperceptible moment later by thunder, as if the storm had moved on. Charlie lowered his head, and even through the rain Patti could see his eyes, brimming



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with light. Then a second bolt of lightning seared the sky, the trunk of the sycamore sliced down the center to within fifteen feet of the ground, and Charlie tore through air already rent by deafening sound.

Charlie lay bandaged on his hospital bed. Gauze filmed him like veils. Every time she looked at him, Patti shook with a fury the depth of which scared her so much that her words came out in reasonable calm, as if this were a discussion about library books, about broccoli, about survivor guilt from an elevator crash. Charlie answered with the same tone. To a passing nurse, they might have been discussing tax reform.

"Why, Charlie?"

"I can't explain. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? For God's sake, Charlie . . . *try*."

He said nothing. Huge dark splotches ringed his eyes, as if he had been in a fistfight. It occurred to Patti that had she passed him on the street like this, she might not have recognized him.

"Charlie . . . I'm scared. The doctor says you're lucky to be alive. At all. I need to understand. Charlie?"

"I thought . . . I wouldn't even care about the pain, the burns, if only . . . "

"If only what?"

"Lightning hits trees like that all the time. Just like that. In that same way. Seventy-five thousand forest fires a year start with lightning."

Patti took a deep breath. She laid both hands across her burgeoning stomach, but her voice kept its relentless calm. "Charlie, we've been happy, the last year or so, haven't we? Haven't we been happy?"

"Happier than I've ever been in my life."

"And was it because . . . was it all because of *that*? Because you thought the laws of probability were suspended around you? Because you survived a freak choking and a freak projectile and a freak fall? Because you believed that until now there was some sort of stupid supernatural crap shoot going on and you were the favored player?"

Charlie watched her from his bruised eyes.

"No," Patti went on slowly, "not because you were winning. That's not what turned you on. It was just because you were in the game. Just because you thought there *was* a game. You wouldn't have minded getting maimed by that lightning if it had only left hieroglyphics burned into the sycamore. If it had only spoken to you from a goddamn burning bush. You'd risk . . . you'd have Lem and Ed die in an elevator as long as there was some sign that there was . . . you'd actually rather . . . "

"No," Charlie said. But his voice was very soft.

Patti looked at him, stood up, and smoothed her maternity jumper free of wrinkles: a fussy gesture, totally unlike her. Never had she looked



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less like a scientist; never had Charlie been more afraid of her. She groped for her purse where it hung over the back of the stiff hospital chair, fumbled the strap onto her shoulder, and walked out.

Charlie turned his face toward the blank wall.

Three nights later, the burn floor of the east wing of the hospital caught fire. Alarms screamed; the sprinkler system turned on. Charlie awoke to find gentle rain falling on his face. He lay quietly, listening to the running footsteps and shouting voices up and down the corridor beyond his door. The smell of smoke, acrid and tantalizing as a volcano, drifted toward him. He crawled painfully out of bed.

The other two beds in the room were empty; it was a slow week for burns. Charlie groped toward the door, stopping to lean heavily on a utilitarian dresser painted the hideous pink of flayed skin. The fire seemed to be at the far end of the corridor, from which smoke roiled in lazy coils. The temperature rose several degrees within the few steps from his room into the hall.

A stout nurse, jaw clenched in fright, said quietly between her teeth, "Come on, Mr. Foster. This way out. Come on, now." She fastened a hand on Charlie's elbow, just below the loose sleeve of his hospital gown.

Charlie shook off the hand and lurched away from her, toward the elevator. She said sharply, "Elevators are inactive during fires, Mr. Foster, you have to—" The rest drowned in more alarms. The lights went out.

The red EXIT sign still glowed. Charlie stumbled toward the stairs. An orderly carrying an elderly woman so wrapped in bandages that only her bony ancient arm hung free reached the door first and opened it with his foot.

Charlie pushed past them, ignoring the orderly's "Hey!" In the stairwell the lights had not gone out. He lurched down two flights of stairs, followed first by the orderly, then by the stout nurse leading two more bandaged figures, and finally by two men bumping what sounded like a gurney down the metal stairs. Intermittently alarms shrieked, stopped, started again. Between mechanical shrieks Charlie heard the men with the gurney cursing methodically. Each time the door opened above, more smoke drifted into the stairwell.

At the second floor landing, the fire door burst open and Charlie was engulfed by young women, none of whom looked sick although they all wore hospital gowns. They jostled against his bandaged burns and he cried out, the sound lost in the din. Borne along in the painful crush of luscious bodies, Charlie reached the first floor landing and staggered out into the cool night. Away from the building, he collapsed onto a patch of grass ornamented with marigolds in a ring of rocks like a very clean



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campfire. Sirens screamed as they whipped around the corner to the other side of the building. Someone bent over him, yelled, "This one's okay," and vanished. Charlie wound his hand around a clump of marigolds and held on. He began to tremble.

When the trembling stopped, he raised his head to look at the hospital. It looked solid and intact, each floor except the east wing third dotted with soft lights from veiled windows. Charlie started to cry.

"Hey," said a young voice beside him. "Don't. It's all right. A fire guy said they got everybody out in time." She put a hand on Charlie's burned arm. He yelled and she jerked back, her pretty uncreased face filled with concern. When she leaned over Charlie, her hair fell in her eyes and her hospital gown slipped off one shoulder. She looked about fifteen.

"Everybody . . . out?" Charlie gasped. It hurt to talk.

"Yeah."

"Not me," Charlie said. The marigolds tore under his hand.

The girl peered at him. "What d'ya mean?"

"I didn't even look. At the fire. I just ran. I didn't even *look*."

The girl inched away from him across the grass. Charlie grabbed her retreating knee. "Was it a normal fire? Was it?"

"A what?"

"A normal fire? Or was there something strange about it, something improbable? Anything at all? Try to remember!"

The girl stopped inching and removed Charlie's hand from her knee. Lips pursed, she scanned his bandaged body, wild eyes, clump of strangled marigolds. Charlie saw that, incredibly, she was chewing gum.

He said eagerly, "Do you always chew gum? Is it that? Do you always chew gum during fires?"

"Do I always—you're whacko, man, you know that?"

Charlie clutched at her. "But do you? *Do* you?"

"Put your hand on my knee again and I'll belt you. An old feeble burned guy like you!"

Charlie groaned. The sound apparently moved the girl from virtue to pity; she sighed and pulled her flannel gown back up on her shoulder. "Look, I don't know if I always chew gum in fires or not. I never *been* in no fires before. I just chew gum since I got pregnant because I stopped smoking, you know? It's bad for kids."

"Pregnant? You're pregnant?"

The girl made a face; suddenly she looked much older. A floodlight threw abrupt glare onto the hospital. Someone behind the curve of light shouted orders. Charlie saw that the girl's eyes were the same fresh blue as her robe, and her hair a soft brown. In the harsh light there was a firm purity to the line of her jaw.

He choked out, "Did the baby have a . . . bodily father?"



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"Ain't no other way to do it, is there?"

"But I need some way to *know!*"

"Know what, for chrissake?"

"*Know,*" Charlie said, but it came out in a whisper.

The girl sighed. "Well, don't freak over it—it was just a guy named Darryl. I met him in a laundromat. Look, man, you need help. Stay here, I'll get somebody."

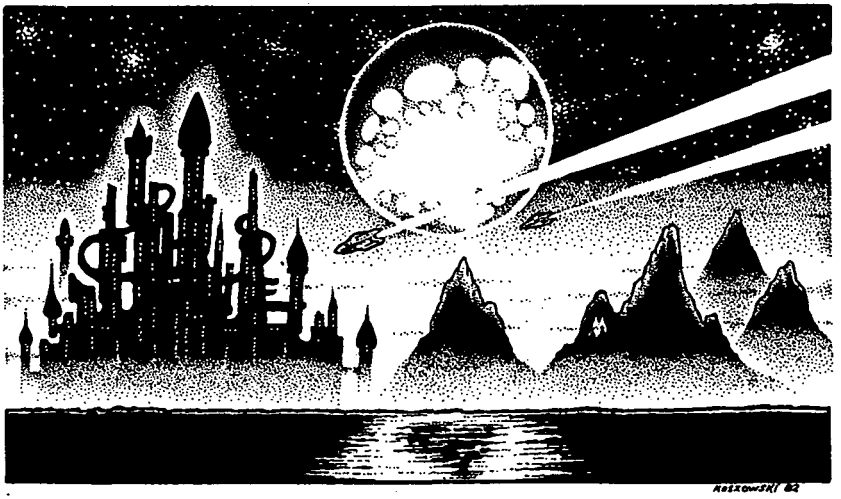
She wandered off. Charlie lay still, staring at the hospital. The normal paraphernalia of firefighting came and went: trucks, ladders, streams of water flung into the night.

"All under control," said a male voice somewhere in the darkness to his left. "Everybody out. Fire contained. We should all get goddamn medals."

Someone else laughed. "Just your nice normal textbook fire."

"But is there a *game!*" Charlie cried.

The girl wandered back and sat down. "You okay? I can't find anybody for you, they're all busy with patients. But nobody's hurt. Damn, look at that, I broke a nail." She bent over her hand, then raised blue eyes to Charlie. "It's a wonder nails last at all. I tell you, it's a fucking miracle." ●





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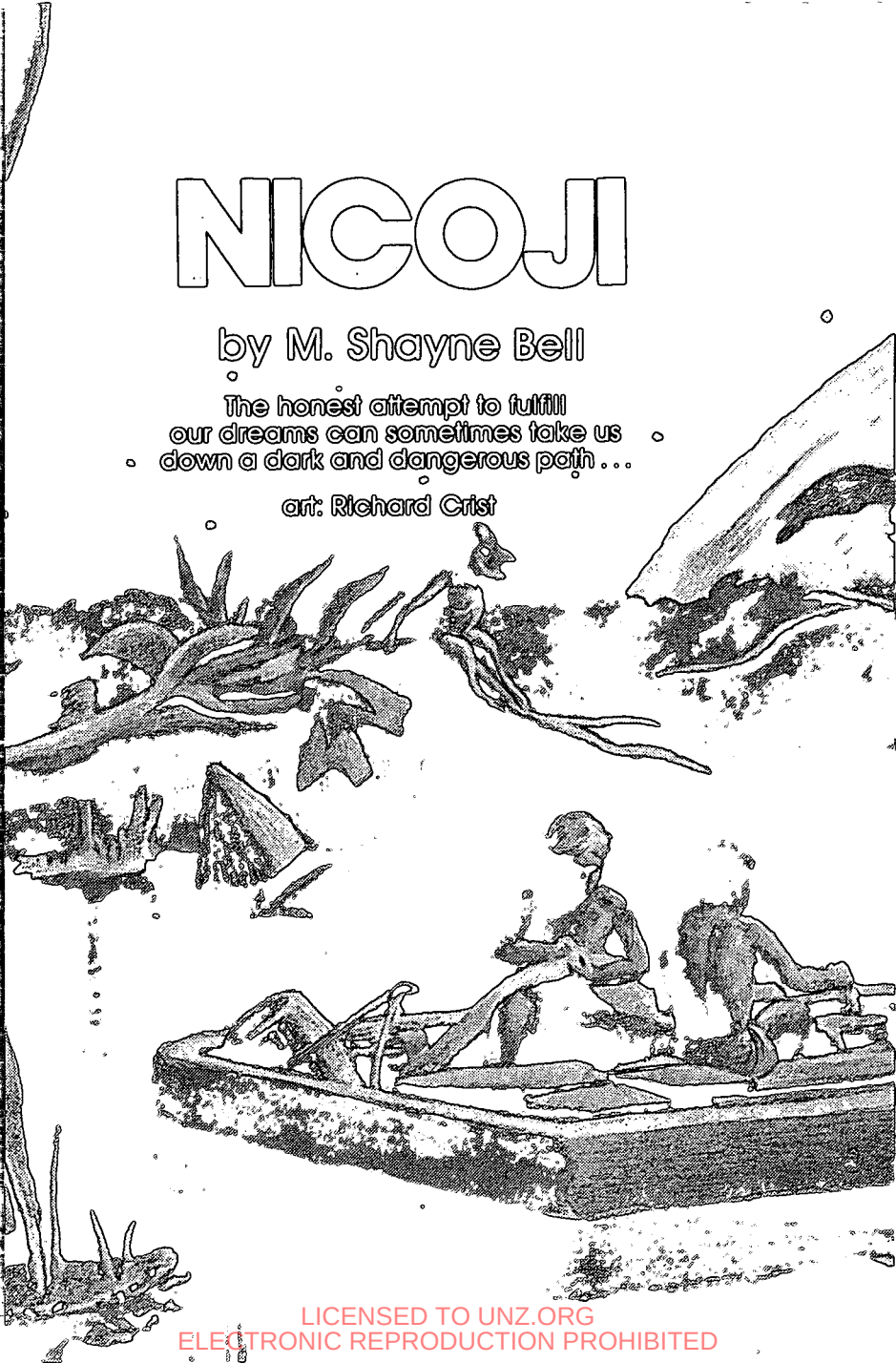
# NICOJI

by M. Shayne Bell

The honest attempt to fulfill our dreams can sometimes take us down a dark and dangerous path . . .

art: Richard Crist



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I got out of the shower and dressed while I was still wet so that maybe I'd cool off while I walked down to the company store. It was evening and quiet. The store was quiet.

But the ship from Earth had come in.

Vattani was opening a wooden crate with the back of a hammer, and Marcos and Fabio, Vattani's two little boys, were kicking through the piles of white plastic packing around his counter. Vattani smiled at me and motioned proudly at his shelves: filled, some of them; restocked, as much as they would be till the next ship.

"Peanut butter!" I said. I grabbed a can of it from the display on the end of the counter and held it up on the palm of my right hand. The can was dented and bulged. The peanut butter had frozen in the unheated hold on the way out. But the can felt full. "I'll take it," I said, not asking or caring about the price. Vattani looked at me doubtfully but put down his hammer and keyed in my purchase. I thought of—Morgan, was it?—who said if you had to ask the price you couldn't afford it. Well, I couldn't afford the peanut butter and I knew it so I didn't bother with the price. Besides, they had me. The company had me. What was another twenty or thirty dollars on my bill?

I put the can on the counter and went after the staples Sam and I needed. That's when I saw the company "boy" sitting in the shadows by an open window next to the racks of boots and underneath hanging rows of inflatable rafts nobody bought because they'd get punctured and the three butterfly nets nobody wanted after the company quit bringing up naturalists. He tapped his gun against his leg and watched me pick up a five-pound sack of rice and a two-and-a-half pound sack of beans. He moved his chair so he could look at me when I went down another aisle to get a loaf of bread and a jar of vinegar that had an expiration date Vattani hadn't changed. He chuckled when I grabbed a bag of raisins Vattani's wife had dried from the native gagga fruit.

I held out the bag. "Want some?"

He laughed. "We've got apples and bananas in the company house, Jake."

I shoved some raisins in my mouth. "You don't know what you're missing."

"I tried 'em once."

I thought of different replies to that, communicative things like shoving fistfuls of gagga raisins down his throat.

"How's the college application?" he asked.

I'd come up with my best friend to make money for college. "Who needs an education when you can work for American Nicoji?" I said. I turned and walked up to the counter. "Having trouble with shoplifting, Vattani?"



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"Less of it. You got your nicoji frozen?" Vattani keyed in the prices of the food I'd picked up.

"Just got in. Sam and I'll eat first."

"Ship leaves in the morning—early. You'll work all night?"

"Sure, work all night."

Vattani stuffed my food in a plastic bag. "You'd better, you and Sam. You missed the last ship, and the price has gone down since then—five cents lower per package, now."

"It's the only ship we missed this year. It came early."

"But you missed it, so I had to extend the credit I've given you these last two years. How will you pay me back?"

I just looked at him.

"You eat fast and get to work."

I put my hand on the counter and stared at him. Marcos and Fabio quit kicking the shredded plastic and looked up at us. Vattani waved back the company boy and finally lit the tile under my hand to add forty-six dollars and twenty-three cents to my bill of "credit." He handed me the groceries. I walked out and let the door slam, listened to the bells over it jangle while I walked down the dirt street.

But I had a can of peanut butter from home, from Earth.

And the sky ahead of me was red on the horizon where the sun was.

Manoel stopped me just down the street from the store. "Dente," he said, pointing to his teeth. He'd never learned much English. "Raimundo."

"Anda já," I said in Portuguese. He took off down the alley that led to Raimundo's house. I followed.

The company had let Raimundo's teeth rot. Raimundo had asked for Sam and me to come help him with his teeth just after we'd gotten in. He thought two Americans would know more about dentistry than the Brazi guys he'd come up with. But we didn't know what to do. He was in so much pain, however, that I took a pair of pliers and pulled out the incisor he pointed to. Since then, he'd asked only me to pull his teeth.

Raimundo was sitting on the one step up to his door, holding the right side of his swollen face. He had a pair of electrician's pliers tucked between his knees. I put my sack of groceries on the step and looked at him. He handed me the pliers and pointed at the third bicuspid behind his upper canine: black, rotted out in the middle. It must have hurt for weeks. "How can you stand waiting so long?" I asked. But I knew. The company kept promising to bring out a dentist, and a dentist could save Raimundo's teeth if they were still in his mouth.

"Pull it, Jake," he said, his speech thick. He tried to talk out of only the left side of his mouth.



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"Let me wash my hands and these pliers."

He grabbed my arm. "Just pull it. Now."

I knelt in front of him and had him lean back against the doorframe so he'd have something to push against when I started pulling. I took another look at the tooth and shook my head. "Tell Manoel to get alcohol, aspirin, clean cotton, and a knife," I told Raimundo.

Raimundo translated for me, and Manoel ran off down the alley toward the bayou, which meant they had their raft packed and ready to go. "You're leaving already?" I asked. They'd gotten in only a day before Sam and me. Raimundo just looked down the alley and held his face.

Manoel got back, handed me his pocketknife and Raimundo the aspirin, set the alcohol and cotton on the step. Raimundo swallowed four aspirin without water, and I took time getting ready so the aspirin would get in his system. I opened the thinnest blade on the pocketknife, stuck it in the alcohol, and laid it on the cotton. "Hold open his mouth," I told Manoel, mimicking what I wanted him to do. He got behind Raimundo, stuck his fingers between Raimundo's teeth on the left side, and held the jaws wide apart. Raimundo grabbed the step with both hands and closed his eyes. I grabbed the tooth with the pliers and pulled hard and fast, to get it over with for Raimundo.

The tooth shattered. Raimundo tried to stand up, but I shoved him back down. Manoel growled Portuguese words I didn't understand—he'd gotten his fingers bitten—but he held onto Raimundo's mouth and opened it up again. I pulled out the parts of the tooth. Only one root came. "I've got to get the other root," I said, and I used the knife to work the root loose enough to grab with the pliers. I pulled it out and laid it on the step with the other pieces of tooth. Blood spattered my arms. Manoel let go of Raimundo's mouth, and Raimundo started spitting blood. I tore off a chunk of cotton, shoved it where the tooth had been, and had Raimundo bite down.

His hands were white, he'd held onto the step so hard. "You hurt me," he mumbled.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I did the best I could."

He looked at me. Manoel tore off a strip of cotton and wiped his knife clean.

I set the can of peanut butter on the table Sam had hammered together from crates Vattani threw away behind his store and listened to Sam whistle while he finished his shower. I was shaking. *I'll never pull another tooth,* I told myself.

I opened the bathroom door and walked in. Sam stopped whistling. "That you, Jake?" he asked from behind the shower curtain.

"Yeah," I said. He started whistling again.



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I wiped steam off part of the broken mirror Sam and I had salvaged from the trash heap north of town and looked at all my teeth. They were fine, no cavities.

It was my turn to cook. I went back to the kitchen, dumped three handfuls of beans in a jar, washed them in tepid water from our clay distiller, and set them to soak on the counter for supper the next night. Then I dumped water and a handful of gagga raisins in a pan and let the raisins plump up while I took a clay bowl and walked out to the freeze-shack for some of the nicoji.

The freeze-shack smelled musty, sweet, like the nicoji. "Light on," I said. I heard a rustling in the shadows and flipped on the light. The help had all scurried under boxes or stacks of burlap sacks. Three help peeked out at me.

"Sorry, guys," I said. The help hate light, even the dim light Sam and I had strung in our freeze-shack.

"It's Jake," some of them whispered. "Jake."

I walked to the far wall where we hung our sacks of nicoji and lifted one down from its hook. It was wet and heavy. I set it carefully on the dirt floor and untied it. Nicoji were still crawling around inside. I put my hand in the sack, and a nicoji wrapped its eight spindly legs around my little finger. I lifted it up. It hung there, its beady eyes looking at me. I flicked it in the pan and picked out eight more nicoji that were still moving, since they'd be the freshest, set the pan on the floor and started to close the sack, thinking we shouldn't eat too many ourselves, not now, but then I thought *what the hell?* We'd had a good catch. Even Vattani would be proud of Sam and me.

Not that it mattered how well Sam and I did.

So I put four more nicoji in the pan, threw one or two nicoji in each corner of the freeze-shack, and hung the sack back on its hook. The help waited till I switched off the light to scramble out after the nicoji.

Sam was still in the shower. I banged on the door. "Supper, Sam!" I yelled. He'd stay in the shower just letting the water run over him whenever we first got back in town, trying to feel clean, and then, after he'd taken all the water in the rooftop storage tank, if it didn't rain we had to go to the well half a mile away for water to cook with and to the company bathhouse if we wanted a bath—five dollars each.

I dumped the water off the raisins, poured in a cup of vinegar, sprinkled sugar and a dash of salt over that, and turned on the heat underneath the pan. When the raisins started bubbling, I rinsed off the thirteen nicoji, chopped off their heads and stiff little legs and tails, dumped the bodies in with the raisins and vinegar, and set them to simmer.



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Sam padded out from the shower, still wet, toweling his hair dry. When he saw the can of peanut butter he just sat down and held it.

"It's been two years," I said.

We ate our nicoji over rice, and though the nicoji had made me a slave I still loved the taste of it. "They never get 'em like this back home," I said. "Fresh."

Sam nodded. We finished the nicoji and carried the peanut butter and bread to the veranda and sat on the steps. Sam cut open the can with his pocketknife. I tore the bread into thin pieces. Sam carefully pried back the lid, and I wiped the peanut butter stuck to it onto a piece of bread. I tore the piece in two, gave Sam half, and we ate without a word.

One of the help wandered out, dragging the garbage sack from the kitchen. The help were famous for scrounging through garbage sacks and trash heaps. This help had on someone's greasy, old shirt that hung in tatters, open. Whoever had thrown it away had cut off and saved all the buttons.

The help dumped out the garbage and rummaged through it looking for the heads, legs, and tails I'd cut from the nicoji we'd had for supper. Little eight-legged "ants" had swarmed all over the nicoji hard parts. The help let a few ants crawl on his fingers, and he watched the ants run up and down his hand. He ate the ones that started up his arm. Eventually he settled back to eat the nicoji, ants and all, watching Sam and me. Suddenly he stuck his fingers in the peanut butter. "Hey!" I yelled. I swatted his hand away, but he lifted it up with a look of horror on his face. He sniffed the peanut butter and wrinkled his nose and looked at Sam and me eating peanut butter on our bread. He tried to shake the peanut butter from his fingers and finally ran to the street and rubbed his fingers in the dirt till they were clean. He came back for the nicoji and walked away, disgusted, leaving the garbage scattered. Sam and I shoved the garbage in the sack and sat back down.

The night had cooled off. There were clouds around us, and lightning, and when it rained it wouldn't matter that Sam had taken all the water. The moon was rising. It filled a third of the sky, shining red through the clouds.

"You boys still eating?"

It was Vattani walking home with his two sons, holding their hands. "Go help your mother home from the bayou," he told them. "I'll meet you at the house." The boys ran off. Senhora Vattani washed other teams' clothes in the bayou. Sam and I washed our own clothes, to save money, and Senhora Vattani hated us for cheating her out of work.

Vattani marched up to our veranda.



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"You let my friend vagabundo buy a can of your peanut butter," Sam said. "Muito obrigado."

"Vagabundos—both of you," Vattani said. "The ship will leave in three hours. Other teams have already taken their nicoji to the office."

"You told me the ship would leave in the morning," I said.

Vattani shrugged. "I was wrong. Ships keep their own time."

*Ships keep the company's time,* I thought.

"Thanks for the warning," Sam said.

I wrapped the peanut butter in a towel to keep off ants, and Sam and I were heading out to the freeze-shack when he heard Marcos and Fabio start shouting for help. We ran down the street to the bayou. The two boys were standing on the rocks where Senhora Vattani washed clothes, pointing and shouting. Senhora Vattani was in the water. "Maria!" she yelled. Maria was her eight-year-old daughter. Sam got to the edge of the rock first and jumped in the water.

I jumped in, too, but Senhora Vattani was floundering. I pulled her to the side. Marcos and Fabio grabbed her arms. Then Sam broke out of the water, with Maria. He shoved her on the rock and started giving her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Senhora Vattani pushed him away and gave Maria mouth-to-mouth herself. Maria coughed and threw up and started crying. Senhora Vattani picked her up and ran for the company house to call down the doctor on the next ship.

Sam turned me around. "Look," he said. Something black had risen to the surface, dead. He pulled it out. It was long and thin, with a big mouth and no teeth. "It had Maria," Sam said. "Maria stabbed my leg with her stick doll's arm," he said. "I had to stab this thing's eyes with the doll before it would let Maria go." Sam was holding his leg. Blood oozed out from between his fingers.

I patted Sam on the back. He didn't own a pocketknife. Sam started dragging the creature to the company house. I helped Fabio and Marcos off the rocks and gathered up Senhora Vattani's clothes so the tide wouldn't take them.

The other teams in town crowded around the steps of the company house, and officials came out and took pictures because the creature was new.

"It hasn't been named," one official said. "You can name it, Sam."

"Maria should name it," he said.

The doctor was in the company house, already down from the station—nobody wondered why, then. The doctor decided Maria was fine, just scared, and he came out to disinfect Sam's leg. Senhora Vattani carried Maria out to name the thing lying in the street. Maria wouldn't look at it, but when her father told her she'd be famous for naming it,



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that that animal would be called by her name forever, she looked at it and called it an afogador, Portuguese for "drowner." Fabio and Marcos kicked it and beat it with sticks till one of the company boys grabbed its tail and dragged it to the trash heap. "It is starting to stink," he said.

An official came out with a recorder, and Sam had to make a deposition. Everybody stood around and listened to him tell his story, and they laughed when he said he had to stab the afogador's eyes with the arm of Maria's stick doll. When the story had been told, Senhora Vattani picked up Maria, had Marcos and Fabio carry her wash, and hurried away. We thought she had gone home.

But she called to Sam from her husband's store when we were walking past. She came out and handed Sam one of her husband's best pocketknives, with a *V* carved in the handle. Senhor Vattani did not argue about it.

Sam dried off in the house. He didn't want to talk about what had happened. We went out to our freeze-shack, pulled down our sacks of nicoji, and set them by the freezer. The freezer was a rectangular machine that misted the nicoji with water and packed them in square, five-pound blocks that were wrapped in plastic and lowered into liquid nitrogen which, at minus 195 degres Fahrenheit, flash-froze the nicoji, forming ice crystals too small to rupture the cells, preserving the color, nutritive value, and taste. The company shipped the nicoji to a station above Earth where they were graded, UNDA inspected, given a final packaging, and shipped down to market.

The freezer had dim, red lights over the table where Sam and I sat to do our cutting. After we turned on the freezer and adjusted the nitrogen pump, we turned off the other lights in the freeze-shack and the help came out. Sam and I had twelve help following us around. We'd had as many as thirty. They'd take turns feeding nicoji bodies down the hole on top of the freezer till the weights registered five pounds and a red light started flashing; then they'd jump from the stool and reach their leathery little hands around Sam and me very carefully, very quietly—holding their breath, almost—and snatch the piles of heads, tails, and legs. We could hear them munching and chittering in the corners all night every night we worked the freeze-shack. By morning they'd be sick, they'd have eaten so much.

"Slow down," Sam said. "Leg." He pointed with his new pocketknife to a bit of leg I'd left on the nicoji I'd just cut. The company inspectors had opened a package from our last shipment and found a tiny bit of chitinous leg. They docked half our money for that. You couldn't train the help to reject a nicoji that still had part of a leg or tail—they liked the stuff—so you had to make sure yourself. Some teams had so much



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trouble with the inspectors that they worked together, one team to cut, the other to inspect what had been cut. Sam and I weren't that good yet, hadn't started making enough money to be in danger of paying off Vattani and buying a ticket home.

"I got a letter," Sam said.

I looked up.

"It's Christmas next month. They got my nicoji already."

The company would ship nicoji at reduced rates to our families so they would think we were making lots of money and were all right—sent the packages with company versions of our letters.

"Think Vattani had his camera fixed?" I asked.

Sam shrugged. Vattani had had a camera our first year out, and Sam and I had cleaned up, rented clothes in Vattani's store to dress up in, and had our pictures taken to send home—we'd sat in the back of Vattani's store in rented clothes holding up handfuls of nicoji we'd caught ourselves. The company'd loved it. We'd been out two months.

Sam started sucking his finger. "Something bit me," he said.

"No nicoji," I said.

He nodded. He stirred the pile of nicoji in front of him with his knife. One started crawling away, and Sam stabbed it and held it up on the end of his blade—a nicoji shark: a carnivore that looked like a nicoji. Eating nicoji in our sack had made it fat. Sam flicked it to the ground. One of the help stomped on it with his heel to make sure it couldn't bite and then started tossing it in the air. He'd throw it so hard it would hit the ceiling and slam back down in the dirt.

One of the help started squealing and jumping up and down—the freezer was out of plastic to wrap nicoji in. I ran for some plastic while Sam turned off the freezer and made the help stop pushing nicoji down the chute. I brought back three boxes, loaded one in the freezer, and we started up again. You couldn't train the help to go after plastic.

"Got enough plastic?" Sam asked.

"Most of last month's," I said.

Sam laughed. It was another way the company kept us. Every team ran its own freeze-shack, but we had to pay rent on the freezers and go to Vattani's store for plastic and liquid nitrogen and company-approved disinfected water to mist the nicoji with.

Sam started humming the tune the company played on its ads back home—"Make a million; Eat nicoji; Spend a million; Beat the times"—and the rain started: a few drops hit the tin roof of our freeze-shack like bullets, and then a downpour came in an explosion of sound that made me remember Javanese rock concerts. The help covered their ears and ran under crates, sacks, and our chairs, chittering loudly, trying to be heard over the rain. But the rain could fall for hours and Sam and I had



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a deadline to beat, so I kept cutting nicoji and Sam stood up to feed nicoji to the freezer.

The help quit chittering, suddenly.

I looked up. Sam looked up, and then we heard a pounding on the door. I ran to open it, and Sam switched off the freezer.

It was Raimundo, wet to the skin. He stepped just inside the door, brushing water from his arms, his pants dripping on the dirt floor. I pushed the door shut.

"I owe you," Raimundo said to me. "I've come to pay you back for helping me with my teeth."

I didn't know if he meant he was going to beat me up for the pain I'd caused him, or what. He walked to where Sam sat, and I followed. "Nosso heroi," he said, slapping Sam's shoulder. "Turn on the freezer." He wanted noise. I thought the rain made enough noise, but Raimundo wanted more. Sam turned on the freezer.

"A new company's set up base on the planalto," he said.

We just stared. The planalto was a series of mesas rising out of the pântano two weeks south of us—solid land to build on, but days away on all sides from nicoji marshes, we were told, and out of our concession anyway.

"American Nicoji's monopoly ran out, and the competition's moving in. This new company pays well. Its town has cinemas, more stores than one, good doctors, and women."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I met one of their teams in the pântano. They had new equipment—prods that shocked nicoji out of the mud before the tide."

"And they told you this—about the cinemas and the women?"

"Do I look like a fantasist? Do I look like my brain is full of lagarto poison?"

I looked at Sam.

"My companheiro and I are poling south to this new company. I spit on American Nicoji for keeping me here three years and letting my teeth rot."

He spat on the floor. I hoped, for his sake, that there was a new company with a dentist. "Come, too," Raimundo said. "You won't need your insurance then."

Sam laughed.

"Do you still have your insurance?"

I nodded. The option to buy life insurance from firms not owned by the company was the one real benefit the company-controlled union allowed us. Sam and I had named each other the beneficiaries of our policies.

"So if Sam dies, you get to go home?" Raimundo laughed, asking me.

"And vice versa," I said.



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"Aren't you afraid he will kill you in the night?" Raimundo asked Sam, pointing his thumb at me.

Sam smiled.

"*If* they let you go home," Raimundo said.

Everybody wondered if they'd really let us go home, where we could talk. I knew only one guy who'd left: Ben Silva. He'd scrimped and saved and one day made enough from a catch to pay off Vattani and buy a one-way ticket halfway home. That was good enough for him. They'd made him wait for three days before they let him up to the ship, and he sat the whole time on the steps of the company house, afraid they'd leave him if he wasn't ready the minute they called. He hadn't bought another thing, not even food, worried he wouldn't have enough money for something he touched that they'd charge him for and that they'd cancel his ticket before he could borrow money to pay off Vattani again. Sam and I took him some food on the second day. He said he'd write us a letter with code words and phrases in it to let us know he'd made it home in one piece, alive. We never got a letter.

"Will you come?"

I looked at Sam. We were both thinking the same thing. Raimundo had been quick and free with his story, and we'd learned not to trust anyone who was easy with information. Our first month out, an older team had given Sam and me directions to a nicoji hole they knew about, and we'd followed their directions to one of the worst holes in the pântano. I wondered if Raimundo was setting up an elaborate joke on me to get even.

"The new company pays experienced guys *more*—they located so close to us, on the very edge of our concession, to draw us all off to work for them."

I looked down and scuffed my right shoe on the ground.

"Oh, I get it," Raimundo said. "Don't trust me. Don't come with someone who's had the way pointed out to him. But when I do not come back from the pântano, think of what I said and head for the planalto. We'll party in the new town."

He kicked a nicoji leg toward one of the help. "Ten cents less per package, this ship," he said. He turned and walked to the door. I let him out and watched him run under the eaves of our house and then up the street, splashing through the rain and mud.

"Vattani said five cents less," I told Sam.

It meant a way out, if it were true. A new company would give us a place to escape to. If they paid a fair price for our nicoji, Sam and I could go home someday.

Most of the help crawled out from under their sacks and boxes and



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chairs after the rain stopped. I wasn't paying much attention to anything but my thoughts—just automatically cutting off nicoji legs, heads, and tails; shoving bodies to one side and hard parts to another; thinking of movie theaters and dentists—when one of the help started screaming. Sam instinctively switched off the freezer, and I jumped up. The help stuffing nicoji down the chute had his hand caught, had probably dropped a nicoji down the chute after the red light started flashing and tried to grab it back. I ran to his side, and he quit screaming once he could see that Sam and I knew what had happened to him. He was shaking so bad the stool he stood on shook, and when I leaned against him to look down the chute, he rubbed his head on my shoulder.

"Hand's caught in the wrapper, Sam, and bleeding."

Sam ran for the alcohol. I flipped the wrapper setting to retract and pulled back the wrapper's arms. The help flipped out his hand and jumped down from the stool. I grabbed him before he could run away and pulled the melted plastic from his hand. Sam came and dumped alcohol over the cuts. The help howled. I smeared on an antibacterial cream that must have felt good because he calmed down while I bandaged his hand. Sam started cleaning the freezer. Two of the help's fingers were broken, and he'd have bad bruises. I made little splints for his fingers and sent him off with four uncut nicoji in his good hand.

We worked till half past midnight, then put on our insulated gloves, boxed up our packages of nicoji, and carried them to the inspectors. Sam and I were the last team in line. The company had hung one light bulb over the door, and the guys standing in the light were swatting bugs. Something flew down my back. I started squirming, and it started biting. "Something's biting my back, Sam!" I said.

He got behind me, shoved his boxes against my back, and smashed whatever had flown down my shirt. "Why did they put up this light?" I asked. No one had ever kept a light outside before.

Agulhas, tiny bugs with eight needle-sharp suckers spaced evenly between their legs, started settling on our necks and arms. We couldn't keep them brushed off. "Turn out the light!" I yelled. Other guys started shouting the same thing.

A company boy shoved out through the door. "Shut up!" he yelled.

"The light's attracting bugs," I yelled back.

"Then complain to your union rep when he comes next month. He insisted you guys needed this light."

The union rep hadn't asked us about putting a light outside in the dark.

"Think of this as your bonus for being last in line," company boy said. "More bugs to swat." He laughed and turned to walk inside.



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"Just turn it out!" I yelled.

"And what will we tell your union?" Company boy swatted his neck, looked at his hand, and rubbed it on his pants.

"At least tell the guys in there to hurry," somebody said.

"Oh, you want me to tell the inspectors they're too slow? You want them to hurry and maybe not figure the right price for your nicoji but at least get you inside and out of the bugs?"

Nobody said a word to that.

Sam and I finally got inside and onto a bench where we swatted the bugs down each other's backs and sat with our cold boxes steaming beside us on the bench and under our feet. I pulled off my shirt and had Sam try to see what bit me at first, but he'd smashed it so bad he couldn't tell what it was. He brushed off my back, and I put on my shirt.

A company boy walked up and down the aisle in front of us, leering, swinging his billy club onto the palm of his hand. The company boys needed clubs. The company house saw trouble.

"Next."

We dumped our boxes on the counter. The inspectors took them to a table and tore into one, tossing random packages of nicoji onto scales and then into a microwave. They cut open the thawed packages, and nicoji juice spurted out over the inspectors' plastic aprons. One fat inspector kept shoving our raw nicoji in his mouth four at a time, chewing and swallowing. He started into another box.

"Hey!" I yelled. "That's *one* already."

He jerked his thumb in my direction. "You guys get the special treatment after last time."

Sam grabbed my arm. I could hear the company boy walking up behind us, slapping his club onto his palm. I wanted to shove the club down his throat, but I knew better than to try it. The inspectors had our nicoji.

They tore open packages from each box. When they finished, the fat inspector stuffed his mouth full of our nicoji again, counted the packages left whole, thought for a minute, then sputtered a price. A different inspector keyed the money into our account and printed out a receipt. Sam put it in his shirt pocket. We turned to leave.

"This way, guys."

The company boy stood in front of us pointing down a hallway with his club.

"Yeah," I said, and I started to brush by. I always walked out the *front* door. He grabbed my shirt collar.

"You hard of hearing? I said this way."

He tried to shove me in the direction he wanted me to go. Six more company boys ran up. Before I could do anything, Sam grabbed my arm



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and pulled me down the hall. The company boys followed. I shoved Sam away from me, mad that he'd stopped me, even though I knew fights didn't get us anywhere except poorer by the time we paid for damages and the company boys' medical bills.

The company doctor met us in a room at the end of the hall. "This won't take long," he said. "It's for your safety, sons."

He called everybody his "sons" though he looked so small and scrawny he probably couldn't father anything.

"What's for our safety?" Sam asked.

"These implants—locators. Help us find you if you get lost in the *pântano*."

He was going to implant a locator on the back of our wrists.

"They're really quite simple," he went on. "The bottom of each locator is coated with a mild acid that quickly destroys the underlying skin, allowing the locator to replace it. The surrounding skin eventually bonds to the edges of the locator, making it a permanent, if shiny, part of your wrists—quite a comfort, I'm sure, when you'll be . . . away from here."

Sam and I stared at him.

"These locators quit functioning if you are killed or if they are removed." He stepped up to a chair. "If one of you'd please sit here and let me disinfect your wrist, we'll get started."

Neither of us moved. Two company boys grabbed my arms and dragged me toward the chair. "Scared of a little pain, Jake?" one sneered. "Don't worry. We'll hold you like your mommy used to when the doctor gave you shots in the ass."

"Freeze you," I said. I broke away, slammed my fist on the guy's nose, and heard it snap. He fell into the doctor, and they both fell in the chair. Sam kicked the table and knocked down the implanter, scattering locators all across the floor. The other company boys ran in. I knocked one down, but two grabbed my arms and shoved me up against the wall. The guy I'd hit on the nose, his face bloody, kicked me twice in the stomach. Someone hit the back of my head with his club, and I fell to the floor. I couldn't get up. I started smashing locators with my fist, but I felt a sting in my leg and the room went black.

I came to, covered with agulhas, lying in mud in the circle of light in front of the company house. On the back of my right wrist, bloody, was a locator. It felt tight in the skin when I moved my hand. I tried to sit up but then dropped back, dizzy from the drug they'd put me out with. Somebody kicked Sam in the ribs, and he rolled over next to me, sprawled an arm across my chest. A company boy crouched down, unbuttoned Sam's shirtpocket, and pulled out our receipt. "This'll cover half the cost of what you two pulled in there," he said.



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He dropped our gloves in the water and stomped off through the mud, splashing water in our faces. I grabbed our gloves and pulled Sam up. "Let's go," I said. But we didn't go home. We staggered down the streets through red moonlight to Raimundo's house. He'd been serious. The company didn't put locators on us for our safety, to help us if we got lost. They wanted to keep track of us, keep us from defecting south to the new company.

Raimundo was gone.

We decided to sleep in our own house that night and head out in the morning. We didn't bother freezing the rest of the nicoji. The company paid only a third of the normal price for packages that came in after the ship had gone—barely enough to cover the cost of plastic wrapping and liquid nitrogen. They claimed it wasn't fresh.

"We've got this to finish," I said to Sam, picking up the can of peanut butter I'd wrapped in a towel.

But the towel was covered with ants.

I dropped the towel on the floor. The can was thick with ants. Sam took out his pocketknife, scraped off the top layer of peanut butter where the ants were, and flicked the ants off the sides and bottom of the can. I brushed off the table. We sat and ate the peanut butter with our fingers.

In the night, the help who had gotten his hand hurt crawled on top of my chest and patted my face till I woke up. "Yeah?" I whispered, trying not to wake Sam. The help held up his hand. "Being better," it chittered.

I knew it would be. The help had such fast metabolisms—they healed faster than anything I'd seen. I started scratching agulha stings on my neck and arms.

"What you want me do nice you?" the help asked.

"Let me sleep."

He patted my face. "What you want most? What you want most, Jake?"

I closed my eyes. "To go home," I said.

He scampered down off my chest and hardly made a noise as he ran out across the straw sleeping mats Sam and I had woven.

I woke two hours before dawn. Sam was gone. I heard someone in the freeze-shack, so I stumbled out there, rubbing my eyes, blinking in the light when I opened the door and walked in. Sam looked up and smiled. He was sitting on the floor, getting ready to drain the liquid nitrogen from the freezer. "Just in time," he said. "I need help with this nozzle."

"What are you doing?"

"Packing up everything we've paid for."

I laughed. We hadn't talked about going to the new company, but we hadn't needed to. We were going, and we both knew it. We'd head south



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as far as we could without upsetting American Nicoji, and then we'd cut off the locators and head for the new town.

Sam had me hold a wrench clamped on the bolt below the nozzle so the hose on the nitrogen can wouldn't turn while he screwed the nozzle in place. Once done, he pulled the drain lever, and we sat on the ground with the can between us, listening to the nitrogen hiss into it. We looked at each other. "Somebody might check to see if we packed up for good," I said.

"We could fool them," Sam said. He tapped the nitrogen can. "We could fill empty cans with water so they'll think we left the nitrogen."

"But we can't hide taking the plastic and our clothes."

Sam nodded. He started rubbing the locator on the back of his wrist. "We'll have to move fast," he said.

But we couldn't walk through town carrying everything we owned. It had to look like we were just going out again. "Let's send some stuff with the help," I suggested. Sam had shooed the help out of the freeze-shack before turning on the light. We hurried outside and called for them. None came. I took down a sack of nicoji and scattered nicoji on the ground. The help came immediately out of the shadows. We let them eat and then handed them our nicoji nets, cooking gear, fish trap, and clothes. They chittered off through the trees, happy to be going, happy we were going in the dark. Sam and I gathered up the medkit, guns, plastic, and liquid nitrogen and hurried down to the raft. No one watched us leave.

The help had dumped our gear on the raft and were chittering in the trees. We packed everything in our waterproof chest. Sam untied the raft and jumped on. I poled us out on the bayou. Sam grabbed his pole, careful of his sore wrist, and we were off. The help followed in the trees. After two minutes we could not see the lights of the company town, could hear only the regular thumping of the generator, and that, too, faded quickly. Red moonlight skittered on the water here and there. The bayou was dark. Sam and I were alone, again, in the pântano—Portuguese for *swamp;* that's all the Brazis had called it: swamp. So many Brazis had come up at first, before the Brazilian government sold its stock in the company, that their names for places stuck.

And the maps in the company house showed tens of thousands of miles of pântano. It was so flat that even where we were, one hundred miles from the sea, when the moon pulled the tide in through the mass of vegetation the water covered all the muddy land. We'd sleep on our raft tied to the top of a tree or in the trees themselves. The help would crowd with us on the platforms we made in the branches, not sleeping, since they slept in the day, but watching Sam and me while we slept.

The trees started shaking and a roar swept over us, whipping the trees back and forth: the ship had taken off. We watched it climb into the sky,


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red-orange glares under its wings. Two help fell in the water. One grabbed my pole and Sam pulled the other on the raft. We lifted them back in the branches. I could see the help with the hurt hand still up there—he'd hung on. His white bandage flashed through the trees ahead of us till dawn began to light the bayou and all the help crept into the shadows to sleep. They'd catch up with us. They knew the route. We had no open water to cross for two days, so they didn't have to keep up. But when we came to open water, in the daylight, we'd have to bundle them up and put them on the raft with us and pole them across to the next grove of trees.

We poled our raft down the bayou all day. Some teams got used to traveling at night, but Sam and I stuck to the day so we could see. We weren't sure enough of the things that hunted in the dark.

When the sun started down and the water began to rise, we laid our poles across the raft and let the raft rise up among the empty boles of a great grove of mature trees. Only young trees had branches below the night waterline. Sam and I picked an old tree with thick branches growing straight out across the water, tied our raft to it, hacked off branches, and made a platform twenty feet above the water. Sam went after the wide leaves we slept on. I let down our fish trap and pulled up one nicoji and a long slimy thing with eight stubby legs that flapped around in the trap till I threw it out. The nicoji surprised me, but only one came up so I decided no big colonies lived nearby. The third time I dropped the trap I brought up six sadfish. Sam and I laughed at their melancholy faces and ate them. By the time we finished washing our dishes and tying everything down on our raft, it had been dark for an hour. Our help came chittering up through the trees. They leaned down from the branches to smell us and then scampered around the platform and the raft.

Sam opened the waterproof chest, pulled out his glasses and flashlight, and read a few pages from his one book, *Moby Dick*. He'd read that book five or six times—twice to me out loud. The wife of our first company inspector had given it to him. It had bored her. When we settled down to sleep—a flashlight in one hand to scare off the littler things that might crawl up after us, our guns strapped to our sides for the rest—the help settled down around us to watch.

In the night, something bellowed, far off, a hollow sound like a foghorn's, deep and huge. The help patted our faces to make sure we were awake, listening. They were terrified, and they made no sound. We heard nothing else unusual for half an hour, and I was drifting off to sleep when it bellowed again, closer. Sam and I sat up. The help climbed quickly and silently into the branches. I occasionally saw pairs of their



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round eyes looking down at us. The help with the hurt hand inched down the tree to the water and rubbed mud and slime over his white bandage, to hide it. I thought we ought to take it off if he was going to do that, but he climbed up the other side of the tree and disappeared. We heard nothing else. Sam and I finally settled back down. I kept thinking of all the things we'd seen that the scientists had never seen, and of all the things we'd heard but never seen.

We got up in the dark when the water started hissing away through the trees. We were quiet then—the night things were still out—and we had to be careful not to let our raft get tangled in branches above the daytime waterline. By dawn we had almost dropped down, and in the light we felt safer. We set our guns in the light to recharge.

My hand with the locator felt stiff and sore. I noticed Sam rubbing his. I wondered what would happen when we cut them out and how long it would take to get to the new company town. "Women, Sam," I said.

He smiled. "More than one, I hope," he said.

I laughed and remembered the "shore leave" the company'd sent us on when we were out one year. They'd flown us up to their station and given us a tiny room together. The fridge was stocked with fruit from home—apples, oranges, even a peach. We sat on the edge of the bed, eating fruit, and someone knocked on the door. I opened it. A pretty girl stood there in a tatty white dress with a red sash around her middle, barefoot. "Oh, there are two of you," she said, and her face went red. The company was so cheap it had sent one girl for the two of us. We had her come in. She ate an apple, and we laughed for a while. "Well," she said when our conversation lagged. She smoothed out her dress and looked at us. I looked at Sam; he looked at me; and we let her go, too embarrassed—she'd been embarrassed, too, though she'd been willing, it was her job—to try anything in the same room. "Yeah, more than one," I said.

We traveled south for a week to the nicoji colony Sam and I'd discovered on our last trip—the best we'd ever found. It was on a huge hummock rising seventeen feet out of the pântano—a mile square, Sam and I figured—and when the tide was out tens of thousands of tiny, black holes covered the mud below the trees, holes that marked where the nicoji burrowed down for the day. When the tide came in the nicoji swarmed out. Since only Sam and I knew about the colony, it hadn't been overharvested, and in three nights we'd catch more nicoji than our raft could carry south to the new company town, a decent catch that would pay our way.

We got to the hummock about midday, so Sam and I tied up the raft



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and lay down on our stomachs to sleep since we'd have to work hard all night. The help scampered out from under the sacks we'd covered them with and clambered up the trees to the shadows. On their way, some poked their hands down nicoji holes and tried to pull up a nicoji. The first few caught one or two—muddy and gasping in the air and light—and carried them up the trees to suck them clean, spit out the mud, and eat them. The rest had a harder time. The nicoji sensed the vibrations of the help walking on the mud and burrowed deeper and at angles from their original tunnels. The last help off the raft didn't catch many nicoji.

Toward evening, I woke up and then woke Sam. The water was rising. We floated up with it and poled our raft toward the center of the hummock to a place the water didn't cover—a dry place twenty feet square—and tied our raft to a tree on the beach. We'd dug three pits there that filled with water where we kept our nicoji alive in burlap sacks till we were ready to go.

Sam and I stripped down to our shorts and started stringing out our nets. The help came up through the trees, slowly, climbed down and chittered around behind us on the grass. It was worktime now, and that never made them happy.

"Fix net? Sam and Jake fix net?"

It was the help with the hurt hand. He was picking up sections of the net and inspecting it.

"Yes, we fix," I said, and then I laughed. I was talking like the help.

"You got hole here."

He held out a section of the net to me and, sure enough, he'd found a hole. I got our needle and hemp from the raft and mended the tear.

When the sun was nearly down, the water around us started to boil: the nicoji were swarming to the surface after bugs that touched down there, never jumping out, just stirring the water. We watched the water carefully, and the help were watching it, trying to see if anything had swum in around the island after something more substantial to eat than nicoji. The water looked fine. Sam and I took opposite ends of the net, our twelve help picked up the middle, and we waded into the water, mud squishing up through our toes.

The nicoji hardly swam away from us. Sam and I waded up to our chests in the water and the help swam bravely, holding their sections of net in their teeth and keeping it from getting tangled. When we started back for shore, dragging the net, it got so heavy Sam and I couldn't pull it and we had to let some of the nicoji go. After we got the net on shore, the nicoji swarmed out and tried to crawl to the water, their tails arched high over their backs. Sam and I scrambled after them, filled two burlap sacks, and dumped the sacks in the pits. The help sat and shoved whole handfuls of nicoji in their mouths, gorging themselves contentedly.



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The water looked fine. We watched the help, and they seemed willing to go again, so we went, this time on the other side of the island. By the time we'd dragged that net to the beach, dumped the nicoji in sacks, carried the sacks to the pits, and straightened out our nets, it had been dark for an hour. Sam and I shone our lights across the water. It bubbled away with the nicoji but nothing more, nothing bigger. We'd usually drag in two or three nets and pole out the raft, watching and taking turns using a smaller net to catch nicoji. Wading through water in the dark was too dangerous. "Time for the raft," I said.

"But look at the nicoji," Sam said.

There were so many nicoji so easily taken.

"Only one more net," he said.

I nodded. If something came after us, it usually got tangled in the net while we climbed on the raft, or on shore, or up a tree. So we went out. But this time we only waded out till the water came up to our bellies. The help swam past Sam. Sam and I started pulling in the net.

And the water stopped boiling. All the noise in the treetops quit, suddenly, as if the silence had been commanded.

Something had come hunting.

Sam and I kept hold of the net—letting the nicoji swim out underneath and above it but keeping the net between us and whatever prowled out there—and started walking backwards toward shore, slowly, disturbing the water as little as possible.

The help suddenly dropped the net, swam to me, and bunched up around my legs. They'd never done that before. We'd always held the net together till every one of us got on the raft or on shore. It was something new, then, out there.

"Sam—" I said.

Something dark rose out of the water in front of Sam.

"Run!"

Sam turned to run but the thing lashed out at him, and he screamed and fell in the water.

I stumbled on shore for my gun and waded out after Sam. Sam was floundering in the water. I splashed up to him, and he hung on around my waist. "Its tongue's around my leg!" he yelled. I held my gun ready to shoot whatever had his leg, but I couldn't see anything. It was under the water. I started dragging Sam to shore, and it rose up, dark and huge. Lagarto. It was a lagarto with its hallucinatory poison on the needles in its tongue. It had been waiting for the poison to work before pulling Sam to its mouth and teeth. It screamed and lunged for Sam's foot.

I shot the lagarto in the head. The light shaved off its forehead and snout, cauterizing the wound so there was no blood. It slumped down in


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the water, dead, but still holding Sam with its tongue. I arched the light through the water to cut the tongue, sending up clouds of steam. The tongue snapped loose. Sam and I fell back.

I pulled Sam to the muddy shore, part of the tongue still wrapped around his leg. Sam reached down to pull it off, but I grabbed his hands. "Don't touch it!" I yelled. I wound a scrap of burlap around my right hand, tore off the tongue, and threw it in the water. Lagarto needles had punctured Sam eight times. Red streaks ran up his leg already. I took Sam's pocketknife out of his shorts, cut his leg, and started sucking and spitting out the blood, fast, trying not to swallow anything. "Help us!" I called to the help, but not one would come near Sam and me.

Sam started hallucinating, pointing, mumbling something about a woman in white with a red sash around her waist and a leaking can of oil. I looked where he pointed and saw such a woman standing back in the huddle of help, but she wasn't holding an oilcan—she was holding a dog, and she wore red slippers, not a red sash. "You're wrong, Sam," I said. "She's got red *slippers* and a little dog, too." As soon as I said that, I realized what was happening, and I slapped my face and stumbled to the raft. I was hallucinating now; I'd swallowed some of the poison. But lagarto poison in my stomach would only make me sick and crazy, not kill me. I had to give Sam a shot of antibiotic and antivenin before I went out of it. By the time I found our medkit, Sam had crawled partway to the raft, knowing what he needed. I ripped open the kit and spilled the syringes and vials in the mud. My eyes weren't focusing. I had to look closely at each vial before I found the one that read Instituto de Butantã, the antivenin center back in São Paulo that developed our medicines. I tore the plastic cap from a syringe, shoved the needle in the antivenin, and filled the syringe. I grabbed Sam's arm and stuck the needle in it—but my own arm stung and I realized I'd shot my own arm, so I pulled out the needle and pinched Sam's arm; mine didn't hurt so I knew I had Sam's. I gave him the shot. I wanted to give him another since I didn't know how much I'd shot in my arm, but I couldn't find the right vial again, and then the woman put down her dog and started walking toward me, smiling, holding out her hand—

I came to my senses just after dawn when I threw up. I could see that it wasn't the first time Sam and I had vomited. I was holding Sam's head in my lap, patting his cheek as if I were one of the help.

The help were gone, off to the shadows. But why had they run from the lagarto? They'd seen Sam and me kill twenty lagarto. And why had they given no warning?

Sam's leg was swollen and red. He was sleeping deeply, sweating. I put down his head and staggered back to the raft after the medkit,



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thinking I had to make some kind of bandage for Sam's leg. I remembered where the girl had stood, and I couldn't help looking for her tracks. There were none. There were no dog tracks. But I looked at the mud flat where the water had been the night before and saw the carcass of the lagarto, partially eaten. Who knows what had crawled around Sam and me, feeding on that thing in the night?

When I found the medkit and started back for Sam, I heard a rustling in the tree above me and looked up. The help were all there, in the shadows. The help with the hurt hand climbed down the branches towards me, shading his eyes from the light.

"Sam die?" he asked.

"No. Sam's alive, barely." I started off for Sam, but the help started cooing sadly, as if they were disappointed. I looked up again.

"You not get insur-nance then, Jake? You not go home?"

It took a minute for that to sink in. The help had all been in the freeze-shack when Raimundo talked to Sam and me about our insurance, and they must have understood that I'd get to go home if Sam died. Then I remembered the help with the hurt hand waking me up in the night to ask what I wanted most—and what I'd answered. "You bastards!" I yelled. I picked up a stick and threw it at them. They clambered higher in the branches, chittering confusedly. I kept throwing sticks, and they finally climbed into other trees and hid in the shadows.

I dumped alcohol over Sam's leg, and that woke him up. He swung his arm over his eyes to keep off the light. "Where is she?" he asked.

"In Kansas," I said. I smeared an antibacterial cream over Sam's leg and bandaged it. I'd have to keep changing the bandage and the cream, and I hoped I'd have enough of each to keep Sam going till I got him to a doctor. I picked our syringes and vials out of the mud, washed them off, gave Sam a shot of antibiotic, and put the medkit back on the raft. I dragged the raft down to the water and tied it to a tree. I went back for our bags of nicoji and dumped them on the raft. When I went back for Sam, the help had crawled into the tree above him, chittering.

"Where you go?" one called.

"*You* go to hell!" I shouted. But I thought about that and changed my mind. "No," I said. "Go back to the old company. You deserve it."

I knew they couldn't understand the irony of what I said, that they'd never understand my actions, but I didn't care. They'd wander back to wherever it was they lived, and when they got hungry enough they'd find some Brazi team to work for. The Brazis could have them.

I dragged Sam onto the raft, untied it, and poled us out on the bayou, heading south. Tomorrow we'd cut out the locators, and if we didn't bleed to death we'd find Raimundo. Otherwise, we'd join Dorothy and Toto in Oz. ●


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The night before I started school I was afraid to go to sleep. My three older sisters had been in school for what seemed a long time, and I'd been the only one home; if I let myself fall asleep, this last night would be gone and the morning would come and the moment that I clearly perceived as the beginning of an enormous change in my life would be upon me. Not for the first time I considered begging my mother to change reality for me, to make it so I didn't have to go. I was five, and I knew she had that power.

I could hear my parents talking in the other room. "She's the baby," my father said. "After tomorrow she won't be a baby anymore."

I clutched my teddy bear and wrapped his short arms as far as they would go around my neck. I was hurting my daddy. Was it my fault I was growing up?

"Oh, Wendell, I don't know what to do." My mother sounded as if she felt guilty, too, but that seemed right to me: She was responsible for all of us, for my father and my sisters and me, for our happiness and our pain.

"What makes you think you can do anything about it?" My father's voice had the mean tone it had so often when he talked to my mother.

"We could have another baby."

"No."

"We could keep her out of school another year."

I was shocked. I was furious. I felt sacrificed for the sake of my father, who, I understood clearly, hadn't even sanctioned such a thing. I pulled at the dangling pink tongue of my bear and it came loose out of his head.

"No," my father said.

"Wendell, please." My mother sounded scared, and that scared me, too. I held onto my bear, who was never mean unless I wanted him to be. "Tell me what to do to make you happy."

"You can't make me happy."

"But that's what I'm here for," my mother said. "That's the whole point."

I buried my face in my bear's fur and willed myself to fall asleep. When I woke up I wore my new dress and my new shoes to the first day of school, and I carried my new Mickey Mouse lunchbox. And I had been right: from that day on, my life changed.

All my life people have been calling me my father's daughter, as though we were very much alike. My mother used to say it all the time when I was growing up. Fondly: "You really are your Daddy's little girl, aren't you, sweetheart?" Petulantly: "I swear, Adele, you're just like him!" Self-deprecatingly: "Half the time I don't even know what you two are talking about. It must be nice to be so smart."

There are stories about the two of us, told so many times that now they


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have the verisimilitude of family legend: how he was the only one who could get me to eat when I was a baby; how when I was a toddler I followed him around and mimicked his speech and his walk; how close we've always been. It's not true. It hasn't been true since I was old enough to have a mind of my own.

They say I look like him, and so I have studied the two of us in photographs and mirrors. Beyond the nondescript brown hair and brown eyes, there is no special physical resemblance.

My mother's eyes are an odd hazel color that changes to blend with whatever she wears. Throughout my infancy and early childhood she must have worn mostly brown, for I experienced a distinct shock the day she wore a sky-blue blouse and I climbed into her lap and saw for the first time that my mother's eyes were not, after all, the same color as my father's and my sisters' and mine. My mother was dressed up that day and smelled of flowers. Later I thought that she must have been away from us, in the company of someone who preferred sky-blue to brown, and that she had just come home.

I can't say whether I look like my mother or not, because I don't really know what she's like. She changes. She's adept at scuttling and at protective coloration. In all our albums there aren't many pictures of her; apparently she usually held the camera. The ones there are are so fuzzy that I never could check the accuracy of my memories.

Her hair, for instance, is gray and cut short now. But it used to be blonde and straight to her waist, kinked in tight red curls to her head, coiled into thick black braids. I don't remember her ever cutting or curling or coloring her hair, but, of course, she must have.

And her size. Since I've known her my mother has been short and squat, considerably overweight. But she's told us that she could have been a professional dancer, that she had the body for it and the talent. My father didn't approve. Vociferously. And so she gave it up. She has given up an enormous amount in order to please him, and she never did succeed. Somehow she had even made a drastic change in her physical appearance, so that there would be no temptation for her to be something he didn't want her to be. I have never seen my mother dance.

Since my father died and my mother moved in with me, I've been hearing it more and more: Adele, you are truly your father's daughter. I don't know what they mean. They say I've inherited his quick mind, his strong will, his sensibilities. But my father was brittle and prismatic and cruelly defended, like a prison tower made of glass. I'm not like that at all.

My sisters even used to accuse me of treating my mother the same way he did. I know that's not true. He worked hard to mold her and train her to be what he wanted her to be, and I doubt he ever was aware of what


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he was doing. I know myself better than that. All I want is for her to be herself.

While I was happy to have her move in with me, I was also a trifle uneasy because I couldn't imagine what it would be like to live with her. Since moving out of my parents' home for the last time I hadn't once seen my mother without my father. Her alliance was clear. I'd tried. I would invite her to lunch, but she was always too busy baking bread or piecing another quilt. I'd stop by when I thought he'd be at work, only to find him home sick or taking the day off to fix the roof, my mother crouched fearfully beside him to hold the flashlight and the nails.

They had been married forty-eight years when he died, and by that time my mother had no ideas of her own, nor even any interests he had not initiated. Having taught all of us to abhor the fallout-shelter mentality that surrounded us while we were growing up, he came as he aged to espouse an aggressive national defense; she said so, too, whatever he said, although in incomplete sentences with dangling modifiers and misplaced referents that destroyed the sense. She baked bread twice a week because he liked the idea of home-baked whole wheat bread without dough conditioners or preservatives; a crack in the crust or an undue heaviness to the loaf could bring her to apologetic tears, and my father meted out his approval judiciously, like single leaden coins.

I've never liked whole wheat bread, and I avoid any discussion of politics. I'm not at all like my father. Still, it was obvious that, of the four of us, I was the only one who could take my mother in. I had the room and the time. All three of my sisters had children.

I don't have children. Ever since I was old enough to understand what babies were, I've desperately wanted one of my own. It's a grief I thought I'd come to terms with, but since my mother moved in it's back: I want a baby more than anything in the world. I want a baby so much that sometimes I imagine I have one. Flesh of my flesh, soul of my soul. Someone I would have the right—even the duty—to prune, like a lovely bonsai tree.

It didn't take long to move her in. A few hours, half a dozen trips in the car, and all her possessions were emptied from the house she'd lived in all her married life. Though she doesn't drive and was moving some distance away, there was nobody to whom she wanted to say good-bye.

That first day, when I showed her to the sunny little room that will no doubt be hers for the rest of her life, I realized how much a child's room it still was: clowns in the wallpaper, frothy peach-colored curtains tied back at the windows with bows. I'd bought the house from people with numerous children and hadn't had the time or the money—or, for that matter, the inclination—to redo all the rooms. I said to myself that


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it was just as well; this was to be my mother's room now, and she should do with it as she pleased.

She never did anything to it, and now she never will. It's still a baby's room. I don't think my mother has ever actively influenced her environment. It's always been the other way around.

Except, of course, that at heart my mother is really in charge. My mother knows how to get what she wants, and what she wants isn't always what it appears to be. Once when I was a teenager, my mother confessed to me—haltingly, with a tenderness that embarrassed and touched me despite myself—that I'd always been her favorite child. I held that between myself and my sisters for a long time. Years later, during one of our infrequent late night wine-smoothed conversations, my sisters and I discovered that she'd said the same thing to each of us. Haltingly. With touching tenderness. As if she were, literally, giving a gift of herself.

That first day, I set down the last stack of boxes on the floor beside her bed. She crossed the room carefully with her armload of clothes, taking tiny steps as if to find her way. The hooks and bars in the closet had all been installed child-height, but they didn't seem much too low for her. "Welcome home," I said, and liked the sound of it.

"It's pretty," she said. When she turned to say it again, her eyes were wide and her cheeks flushed, like an excited child's. "Oh, Adele, it's so pretty!"

We moved toward each other and embraced in the middle of the room. Astonishingly, maddeningly, I was missing my father, and I knew she was, too. It had been a long time since I'd hugged anyone. Once my hurts were more complex than could be fixed by a Band-Aid and a kiss, I hadn't been able to find much comfort anywhere. But now there was an odd kind of comfort for me, standing there with my little mother in my arms.

It seemed to me that she was smaller than I remembered, frailer, more childlike. I thought it was probably because I felt more like a grownup, welcoming my mother into my own home. I thought that most adult children must feel that way about their parents at one time or another, and that it was both an unsettling and a triumphant feeling. I settled my arms around her and smiled at my own suggestibility. I didn't want to let her go.

"Adele," she whispered, her head on my shoulder. "I don't want to be a burden to you."

"You're not."

"I'm an old woman. No use to anyone."

I reassured her. I dried her tears. I helped her put away her few things in the nooks and crannies of the little girl's room.

There was never a time when my mother didn't give in to my father.



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I was very young when I noticed it, and it outraged me, the price she paid for what wasn't even love. It was something else, though. Control, I think. My mother wins.

When my sister Renee was nine or ten she wanted a horse. A lot of girls that age love horses, but Renee was obsessed and miserable. There wasn't any good reason why she couldn't have had one; we had the place for it, and the money, and no one doubted that Renee would take care of it. But my father said no. Having a horse was silly and extravagant. Case closed.

It became an extended family crisis. Renee cried and pleaded. My father raged. Renee tried obsequiousness; he accepted all her favors grim-faced and became more and more intransigent. The rest of us chimed in, a rare display of sibling unity. My mother said, in her mealy-mouthed way, "Wendell, maybe we could consider it." None of it made any difference. My father had made up his mind.

By this time Renee, a strong-willed child, had made herself sick with grief and fury and desire. Late one night I saw my mother coming out of her room, looking worried and, I thought, determined. I was sure she saw me watching her from the bathroom door, but she didn't acknowledge my presence; it was as if she didn't recognize me. I was afraid to go back to sleep, afraid I'd dream Renee had died and then it would be true. Renee and I never did get along very well.

I finally did fall asleep, of course, and Renee didn't die. The next day was Saturday, so all of us were home. Except my mother. My father said she'd gone shopping, but I don't think he knew where she was; once in a while my mother would be gone for several hours and would come back looking content and tired, and she was evasive if you asked her where she'd been. Our lives weren't much affected by these little disappearances: dinner was always on time, and twice a week our clean laundry was folded and sweet-smelling on our beds. So we scarcely noticed she'd been gone. But it must have made my father crazy.

That Saturday morning when I woke up there was a horse in our backyard and Renee, in her pink nightgown, was riding it. A black horse with the sun on its mane, flying over the bright green grass.

I was young, and my memories of what happened next have always been inexact. I know that my father stormed out of the house and pulled Renee off the horse's back. I know that he spanked her and sent her to bed for the rest of the day; later she told me that it was worth it and more, to ride the wonderful golden horse. She said it was a golden horse; I remember that it was black. I know that by lunchtime my mother was quietly back, and the horse was gone.

"Adele," my mother said brightly, "haven't you ever wanted a family?"



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"You and Bridget and Margot and Renee and their kids are all the family I need, thank you."

It was a few months after she'd moved in. We were sitting in the living room after the evening news. She had been acting more and more nervous and fidgety lately, peering at my face as if trying to understand something there. She sat on the couch, her fluffy white slippers with the cat faces tucked up under her and her soft robe pulled down over her knees.

We hadn't had this conversation before, though I'd been anticipating it for years. Once I realized that I would never marry and have children, I kept expecting my parents to express their disappointment. They never did. Instead of feeling relieved or grateful, I tried to stay wary. Now her first words on the subject, blunt as a child's, snapped my defenses up again, brittle and colored like the rainbow.

"But a baby of your own, Adele. They're so *cute*. Wouldn't that be *fun*?"

"It's a little late for that."

"Maybe not."

She was looking mischievous, I thought. Playful and secretive. It occurred to me that maybe she really wanted to talk about herself, as I understood old people often did, so I tried: "Did you enjoy being a mother? When all of us were small?"

She didn't even acknowledge the question. She was playing with the belt of her robe, twisting it into knots and bows around her hand. She was making shadow-faces on the wall with her fingers and fists: a duck, a dog, a creeping spider. She cocked her head, peered at me coyly, and said, "You don't even have any pets."

"I don't have room for a dog. Cats claw the furniture."

"You could get a bird. Or fish, maybe." Her face lit up. "I know! A rabbit! A cute little bunny rabbit with a white tail!"

I shut myself in my room until I heard her go to bed. I felt violated. How dare she bring up the subject of a baby when I couldn't have one, no matter what she said? When my sisters started having their babies it was all I could do to think their names. I sent money because I couldn't bear to shop for baby gifts. I hid their first pictures away unless they were coming to visit. In recent years it's been easier, as the nieces and nephews have been growing up. Apparently it isn't a *child* I yearn for, but a *baby*. A blank slate. A creature without ideas of its own. Who would need me absolutely. Who would have no choice but to love me.

There were periods throughout my childhood when my father wasn't home. We understood that he was away on business, that he was working hard to better his position in the company. When I was very little I suppose I missed him. As I grew older and saw that he left my mother with four little girls to take care of—and the house, and the land, and the animals, and the cars—I grew resentful. I felt guilty. My sisters and



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I worked hard to help her. It was never enough. When my father came back—we'd come home from school or we'd wake up in the morning and he'd be there, as if he'd never left, as if he had a right to inform our lives again—nothing had ever been done well enough. There was dust on the windowsills, or the pickup's oil was low, or the back corners of the lawn hadn't been mowed close enough. Or my mother was ironing and had clothes hanging in the living room, like shanty town, my father said.

He yelled. He sulked. Or he walked out again. My mother went behind the barn to throw her apron over her head and weep. I grew increasingly angry with him and ashamed of her. I completely stopped trying to help, partly out a fear of complicity, partly because I hoped it would force her to stand up for herself.

As time went by my father's absences grew longer and his returns more difficult. As far as I knew he never hit her, but he might as well have; his abusiveness was there, and her desperate dependency that fostered it. Bridget and Margot got married and moved away. Renee did everything she could to help my mother and berated me for refusing to. I grew more and more offended, not only by my father's unreasonableness and my mother's passivity but also by the increasing disorder of the household. My mother seemed impervious to me. Renee started saying I was just like our father.

Then once when my father was gone my mother left, too. I was studying for a chemistry midterm and spent practically all of Friday night closeted in my room, sweating over formulae that made no inherent sense and trying not to think about anything else. When the alarm went off early Saturday morning and I stumbled down to the kitchen, I found a woman there I didn't know. Olive-skinned and broad-shouldered. Her voice brisk and heavily-accented. Something familiar about her downcast eyes. Wearing a uniform out of a situation comedy: black dress, frilly apron, cap. A maid, she said. Come to take care of our house.

"Where's my mother?" I asked this woman.

She laughed, but she didn't answer. She was busy at the oven, scouring, and the bottles and brushes of her cleaning supplies were arrayed on the stove top above her.

Hurriedly, feeling displaced from my mother's own kitchen, I got my juice and went back up to my room. The chemistry made less sense than ever, but I pored over my notes for a full hour by my desk clock before I let myself take a break.

The maid was gone. The kitchen was sparkling, and a fresh pot of coffee stood on the shiny counter. I took my coffee irritably out onto the patio and came upon a man I had never seen before, down on his hands and knees among the peonies. A gardener, he told me pleasantly enough. Come to tend the garden.


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"Where's my mother?" I demanded.

He was whistling. His head in its broad flat hat was bent low under a peony bush. Perhaps he didn't hear me. I drank my coffee slowly in a chair in the sun, reciting formulae in my mind. The fatigue and test anxiety would have been bad enough, but I was also feeling bleary from the absence of my mother and the appearance in our house of the gardener and the maid.

And, one by one throughout that day: A mechanic on his back under the station wagon. A chauffeur to take Renee to band practice. A chimney sweep in top hat and tails twirling a long-handled brush inside our chimneys. A chef. And even, finally, a chemistry tutor for me.

I got an A on the midterm, in a class I'd been on the verge of failing outright. When my father came home he apparently was satisfied; for the first time, I heard no apologies or recriminations, saw no tears. The extras had vanished by then and my mother was back, looking smug, placidly brewing my father's favorite tea-with-honey in her spotless kitchen.

Now my mother was living with me, and I could see how powerful she was. I felt used. I stayed in my room a long time. When I finally heard my mother go to bed, I came out to close up the house for the night. I never could rely on her to remember. I was straightening up the living room, turning off the lights, drawing the drapes, when I looked out the front picture window and a rabbit was sitting on the porch swing.

At first I thought it was the neighbors' yellow cat. I'd never seen a rabbit in the city; all the damage to vegetable gardens around here is done by cats and birds and by squirrels so confident they seem half-tame. But as I stared at it the creature raised itself onto its hind legs and stared back. Its long ears wiggled. Its nose and whiskers twitched. Its front paws bobbed. We must have regarded each other for a good ten seconds. Then it hopped away, its white tail disappearing into the autumn-brown foliage of the tiger lilies around the porch.

I pulled the drapes shut and locked the front door. Then I went to check on my mother. It was part of my nightly routine now, but that night it seemed to have a certain urgency that I didn't fully understand. She wasn't there. Her bed hadn't been slept in: the ruffled spread was still neatly tucked in under the rolled pillow, and the rag doll with her vacuous smile still sat spread-legged in her place.

Breathing hard from a kind of panic and from an irritation so enormous that it bordered on fury, I stood helplessly for a moment in her empty doorway. Then I shrugged and went to the bathroom to get myself ready for bed. I left the door to her room wide open and the bathroom door ajar. I took my time.

When I had finished with the cold creams and curlers and dental floss,



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I went down the hall again in my pajamas and slippers to check in her room again. I hadn't heard her come by, and I would have, but I didn't know what else to do.

She was there, curled up in her bed with the covers pulled up to her chin, apparently sound asleep. The rag doll sat primly in the little chair by the bed, smiling flatly out over the room. In the glow from the streetlight outside her window, my mother's hair and skin looked a warm golden brown.

In the morning she said she'd just gone out for a walk, it was such a pretty night. She cried when I scolded her for not letting me know, and I was harder on her than necessary. She spent the day being obsequious and getting on my nerves. I spent it trying to stay away from her and feeling guilty and manipulated.

Later she baked bread. For some reason the thought of it softened my mood a little, even though I don't like whole wheat bread. At first I could hear her clattering and singing in the kitchen. Then for a while there was silence. I was reading in my room; she appeared hesitantly in the doorway and, when I didn't look up, knocked on the jamb. I scowled. "What?"

"This doesn't make sense."

"What are you talking about?"

She held the cookbook out toward me in both arms, as if it were too heavy for her. "I can't—I don't know what it says."

I stared at her for a moment and then sighed. "Come here." I took my feet off the stool and had her sit there. She wrapped her arms around her knees and kept the cookbook open precariously in her lap. I moved my chair so that I was looking over her shoulder. "Read me the recipe."

She couldn't. She didn't seem to recognize half the words, and the measurements obviously were too complex for her. When she looked up at me her cheeks were wet and rosy and her eyes were half-closed, so that I couldn't really see their color or their expression.

Together we made the bread. I read her the recipe step by step, helped her to measure the ingredients in the big glass measuring cup, even kneaded the dough for her when it seemed she didn't have the strength. The kitchen turned warm and homey; the bread baking in the oven smelled wonderful. When the loaves came out they were perfect; we cut thick slices and spread them with honey-butter and stood in the kitchen to eat them together, my arm around her shoulders.

Her mouth full, she turned her face into my chest and murmured, "I'm an old lady, Adele."

"You're not an old lady," I told her, and then, wondering why I'd said that, I kissed her baby-fine hair.

Since then we've been through a winter, a cold and snowy one during


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which neither of us went outside very much except twice to build snowmen taller than she was. I remembered building snowmen with my daddy; I remembered the flat black button eyes. Weekends we baked cookies together; she patted the dough flat with her open palms. We had our first Christmas together, and both of us loved the lights.

At night I cradled her head in my lap. Or I rocked gently and sang quiet songs. "Adele," she would whisper, "tell me how to make you happy." I would smooth her cheek and tell her over and over again that she was making me very happy just the way she was.

My sisters called every now and then. Renee and her family came once to visit. She said my mother was failing. She said I was treating her just like my father. I don't know what she was talking about. We're doing fine.

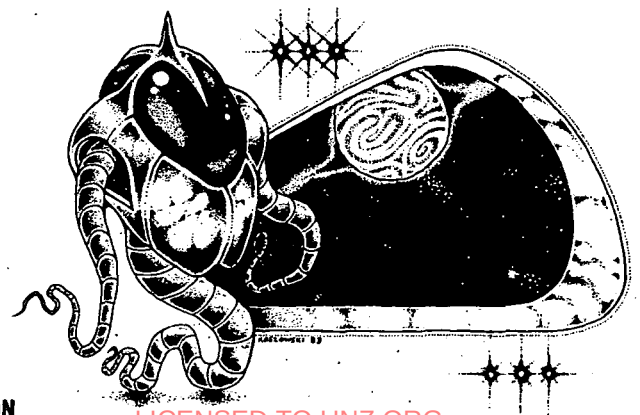
In the spring I could hardly wait to show her the pale new leaves against the pale blue sky. She exclaimed, and I held her hand. Lovingly. Impatiently. Desperately wanting the time to pass.

Now it is summer. She goes to work with me every day; I don't like to leave her with strangers. She's good. She cries only when she needs something and, though she can't tell me, I always seem to know what to do. She plays in her chair. People come in to see her, and they all say how beautiful she is. I try to be modest, but I know they're right.

Sometimes I wonder what has happened to me. Sometimes, when I get up in the night to tend to her, I am totally disoriented. I don't know who I am anymore, except in relation to her. She dominates my life. Her needs are so basic and so clear that they always take precedence over mine.

But always I can remind myself: It's worth it. She's everything I ever wanted. My life is full and comforted and safe now for the first time since I was old enough to have a mind of my own.

And I hardly think about my father at all anymore. ●





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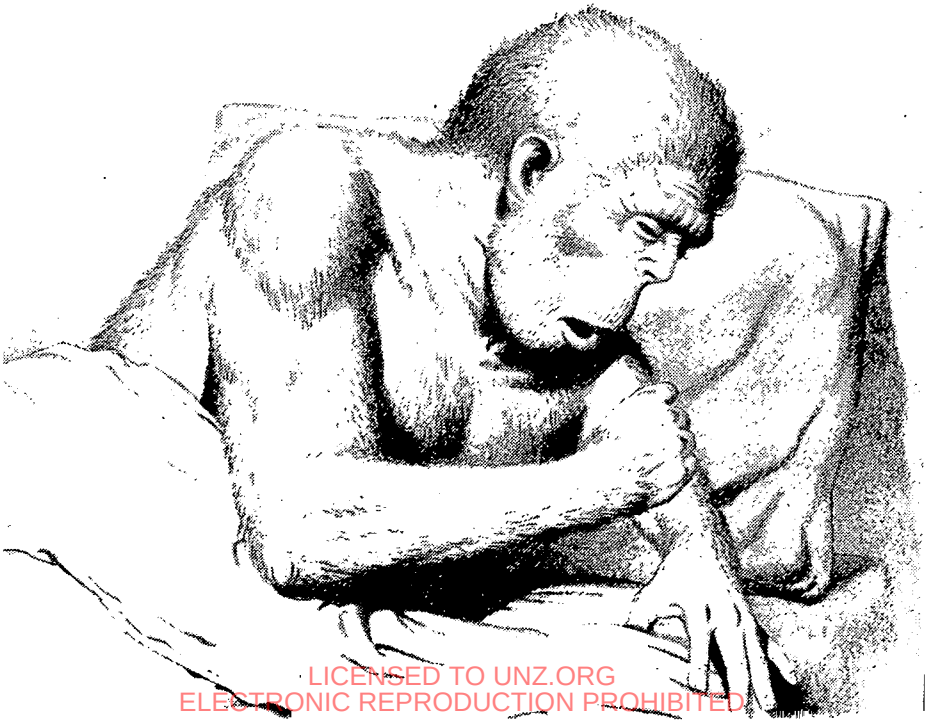
# FREEDOM

## by Harry Turtledove

The following is another of Harry Turtledove's popular sim-world stories, and it is a tale which takes a serious look at the question of "Freedom." Mr. Turtledove has dedicated this story to the memory of his friend and colleague, Professor Lowell Clucas of the University of Pennsylvania.

art: Bob Walters



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Dr. Peter Howard stepped to the podium with the brisk strides of a man who did not believe in wasting any time, ever. Yes, I have something to say, his walk proclaimed—I'll say it and get out and get back to work, and once you've heard it you can do what you like with it.

Television lights glared overhead; flashbulbs from newspaper photographers made even the determined Dr. Howard blink repeatedly. As soon as he reached the rostrum, he tapped on the microphone for quiet. When he did not get it right away, a frown made his long, thin face longer.

He tapped again, louder this time, and said, "I'd like to begin with a short statement, if I could. I don't want to spend more time here in Philadelphia than I have to. I want to get down to Terminus and back to work."

The reporters gradually quieted. They still were not fast enough to suit Howard, who began when the room in the Hall of the Popular Assembly was still buzzing with talk: "I have some progress to report in our efforts to find a cure for acquired immune deficiency syndrome, more commonly known as AIDS."

That got him silence, but only a moment's worth. Then the buzz became a roar. A whole new fusillade of flashbulbs went off. Howard held up his hand, as much to protect his eyes as to ask to be allowed to go on.

Finally he could. "I do not yet *have* a cure," he said firmly. Setting off hysteria was the last thing he wanted. The reporters who had leaped to their feet sat down again. Good, Howard thought: having ridden an emotional roller-coaster in two sentences, maybe they would settle down now and listen.

He said, "As you know, the HIV virus that causes AIDS attacks the body's immune system, specifically the white blood cells called T-lymphocytes. Without these cells to fight off infection, the body becomes vulnerable to opportunistic diseases it would otherwise repel. Eventually, one of them proves fatal to the patient.

"At the Terminus Disease Research Center, we have developed a drug we are calling an HIV inhibitor, or HIVI for short. In the laboratory, HIVI seems to help prevent the virus from gaining a foothold in the body's T-cells, and strengthens the effectiveness of the antibodies the immune system produces to fight AIDS. Let me show you what we have achieved."

He gestured in the direction from which he had come, his hands shaping words almost everyone in the chamber followed as easily as speech: *Out here. Now.* A sturdy male sim emerged to join him at the podium. "This is Matt," Howard said.

More flashbulbs popped. Matt lowered his head so that his heavy brow ridges protected his eyes from the bursts of intolerable light. "How do



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you feel, Matt?" Howard asked. He signed the words as he spoke them, to make sure the sim would understand.

*Feel good,* Matt answered with his hands; as was true with almost all sims, signtalk was much easier for him than true speech.

"Matt feels good now," Howard said. "Sadly, six months ago he was much less well." The doctor waved a hand. The lights dimmed; a large screen dropped into place behind him and Matt. Howard waved again. At the far end of the hall, a slide projector came on.

The hall grew truly quiet at last. Into that silence, Howard said, "This was Matt six months ago." The sim on the slide was sadly different from the one who stood before the reporters in the flesh. The Federated Commonwealths—the world—had seen too many cases of AIDS for them to mistake the one here. The image of the emaciated sim, his once-thick hair falling out in clumps all over his body, was a vivid—and dreadful—illustration of why in Africa AIDS was simply called "the slims."

Howard went on, "Two days after that picture was taken, Matt began receiving HIVI. Today, his T-cells are nearly normal, as are his immune responses. He does not even know he still has AIDS."

*Feel good,* Matt signed again.

The reporters could not stand it any more. "Why isn't this a cure, then?" one of them shouted.

"Because—as I was about to say," Howard added pointedly, "the AIDS virus is still in Matt's bloodstream. He can still transmit it to others—other sims in his case, I suppose, but in theory to humans as well—through sexual relations. And if he stops receiving HIVI injections, the symptoms of AIDS will return. Now"—he emphasized the word—"I will respond to questions."

The frantically waving hands reminded him of storm-lashed treetops. He chose one at random. "Yes, you in the third row, with the blue ruffled tunic."

"How many sims have died of AIDS in the course of your experiments?" the man asked.

Howard pursed his lips. He had expected questions of that sort. With the demonstrators marching outside the Hall of the Popular Assembly, he would have been an idiot not to. But he had hoped not to have to deal with them so soon. He should have listened to his colleagues down in Terminus, and planted a few people to ask the questions he wanted asked. He had always been headstrong, though. He thought he could deal with anything. Now he'd have to.

"My program, to date, has seen the expiration of twenty-eight sims," he answered steadily.

His luck was not all bad. The reporter simply followed up by asking,


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"Wouldn't it have been better to use shimpanses rather than sims in your research?"

"Other than sims and men, shimpanses are the only creatures in which the AIDS virus will grow," Howard acknowledged. "But there are several objections to their use in AIDS research. Most obvious, of course, is the fact that most of them must be caught wild in Africa and then shipped to the FCA. That makes the supply uncertain and expensive, all the more so because of the growing instability in the African states as the AIDS epidemic debilitates them. Sims, being native to America, are easily available.

"There are also other reasons for preferring them to shimpanses. Biologically, sims are much closer to humans than shimpanses are: as we all know, mixed births between sims and humans are perfectly possible."

The reporters muttered in distaste. Everyone knew that, but it was something seldom mentioned outside of dirty jokes. Howard suspected there would be shocked gasps in living rooms all across the Federated Commonwealths: talking about sex between people and sims was not standard television fare.

"Also, of course," the doctor finished, "sims have the advantage of being able to report symptoms to us, something of which shimpanses are incapable." He pointed to another reporter. "Yes?"

"Isn't that part of the problem, Dr. Howard?" the fellow asked. "How do you feel about deliberately subjecting twenty-eight intelligent creatures to the grim, lingering death AIDS brings?"

"I had hoped some of you might perhaps be interested in the success—or at least the partial success—of HIVI, rather than in the failures that preceded it," Howard said sharply.

"I am, Dr. Howard," the reporter said, "but that's not the question I asked."

Howard scowled out at the audience, but saw everyone nodding along with the reporter. If some of these people had their way, he thought with sudden hot anger that he did his best to conceal, he'd be lucky to be able to work with shimpanses, let alone sims.

He chose his words with care; he had not come up to Philadelphia to antagonize the press: "I always regret sacrificing any, ah, creatures in the laboratory, but, particularly in the case of what is, as you say, a grim disease such as AIDS, I feel justified in doing whatever I must to save people's lives."

"But sims—" the reporter persisted.

Howard cut him off. "—are not people. The law has never regarded them as such. They are different from animals, true, but they are also very different from us. The sims in my research project were purchased with an appropriation from the Senate for that express purpose. Every-


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thing I have done has been in accordance with all applicable regulations. And that is all I have to say on *that* topic." He looked toward a woman reporter. "Yes?"

"What makes HIVI more effective against AIDS than earlier drugs?"

Howard nodded to her and smiled his thanks. At last, a sensible question. "We're still not entirely sure, Mistress, ah—"

"Reynolds."

"Mistress Reynolds, but we believe that the chief improvement has to do with the way HIVI interacts with the T-cells' outer membranes and strengthens them, making them more resistant to penetration by the AIDS virus. HIVI was developed from—"

Round and round, round and round—Ken Dixon was getting sick of carrying his picket sign. He also did not like the way the greencoats were gathering in front of the Hall of the Popular Assembly. He could not read their faces, not with the mirrored visors on their helmets. But their body language said they were going to break up the demonstration soon.

"Killing sims is murder!" he chanted. He'd been calling that for a couple of hours now, since before Dr. Howard's news conference convened. His throat felt sore and scratchy.

A man walking on the part of the sidewalk the demonstration wasn't using caught his eye. "Not under the law, it's not," he said. He looked prosperous and well-fed, nothing like a sim who'd been given AIDS on purpose.

Likely a lawyer himself, Dixon thought scornfully; Philadelphia was lousy with them. While the chant went on around the young man, he broke it to say, "The law is wrong."

The probable lawyer fell into step beside him. "Why?" he asked. "Sims aren't people. If using them will help us rid ourselves of this terrible disease, why shouldn't we?"

Dixon frowned. At the planning meeting for this protest, he'd worried out loud that people would say just what this plump fellow was saying, that the threat of AIDS would let people justify the horror of the Terminus labs. He'd been argued down then, and now gave back the reasoning the rest of the steering committee had used against him: "Howard's AIDS research is just a fragment of what we're talking about here. If you allow it, you set a precedent for allowing all the other cruelty that sims have suffered since people first came to America: everything from working them to death on farms and in mines to hunting them and killing them for sport." He screwed up his face to show what he thought of that kind of sport.



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"Sims were here," the plump man shrugged. "We used them to do the work we didn't care to do for ourselves. We still do. Why not?"

The man's lack of concern grated on Dixon all over again, but he thought before he answered; the fellow was not a fool. "In the old days we needed them, I admit. I'm not saying what we did then was right—far from it—but it was understandable. It isn't any more, not with machines to do sim-work, and do it better, faster, and cheaper than sims ever did."

"You'd send them all to the preserves, then?"

"That would be the ideal solution," Dixon said cautiously. Most of the people marching with him would have given the plump man a *yes* at once. Three big tracts of land—together they were as large as a fair-sized commonwealth—one in the Rockies, one on the plains, and one in the northwest woods, gave wild sims and their way of life a last stronghold in the FCA.

Trouble was, even a small band of wild sims needed a large territory on which to forage. There wasn't enough land to accommodate the subhumans from civilized country, even assuming they wanted to trade their lives for ones like those of their forefathers.

"And in this not so ideal world?" the plump man asked, his raised eyebrow telling Dixon he knew all the objections that had popped into the demonstrator's mind.

"As much freedom as they can handle," Dixon said. He jerked his chin at the Hall of the Popular Assembly. "At least freedom from being made into lab animals just because they're too much like us."

That eyebrow, damn it, climbed higher. " 'As much freedom as they can handle,' " the plump man echoed. "I can't imagine a more dangerous gift, either for the sims or the people who give it to them." His eyes followed Dixon's stubborn chin to the portico of the Hall. Someone was handing the greencoat chief a rolled-up piece of paper. The fellow resumed, "I would say, for example, that our esteemed constabulary has just been granted all the freedom it can handle."

"Yes," Dixon said unhappily. He knew a writ when he saw one. Somebody on the committee had fouled up; the legal side was supposed to keep the greencoats off people's backs until the protest broke up by itself.

He turned to say that to the man who'd been walking with him. The fellow wasn't there anymore. Dixon spotted him walking purposefully down the street in the direction he'd been going before he fell in with the demonstration. From the plump man's perspective, that made good sense. Dixon was tempted to disappear himself.

The greencoat chief put a hailer to his mouth. The static that belched from it as he turned it on made everybody look his way who hadn't already. One of his assistants ceremoniously unrolled the writ.

"Uh, oh, trouble," Melody Porter said from in front of Dixon. They'd


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been in a lot of the same classes at the Philadelphia Collegium since they were both freshmen—almost four years now, he thought, bemused. They'd been in a lot of demonstrations together, too. Melody was even more strongly committed to justice for sims than he was. She came by it honestly; she was the great-great-granddaughter of Henry Quick, the trapper who'd really founded the sim justice movement.

In an altogether different vein, Dixon thought, marching behind her was one of the things that made protests worthwhile.

After a few more seconds of fumbling, the boss greencoat finally got the hailer working. His aide handed him the legal paper. *"Pro bono publico,"* he intoned, his amplified voice filling the square with formality. Dixon wondered how many horrors had been perpetrated "for the public good."

*"Pro bono publico,"* the greencoat repeated for the sake of the record and for the benefit of everyone this side of complete nerve-dead deafness. Then he got down to business: "A court has declared this rally a danger to public order. Those who do not disperse in the next five minutes will be liable to arrest."

The blunt demand jerked the protesters out of their chant. People shouted back at the greencoat: "We're peaceable! Why aren't you?" "Can't stand to hear the truth, eh?" And a cry that started a new chant: "Justice for sims, and for people too!" Even so, Dixon noticed that the marchers' picket signs, which had been steady, began to jerk as if pelted by hailstones. People were having second thoughts. Few were leaving, though.

The officer with the hailer knew his job. He kept the pressure on, loudly announcing each minute as it went by. The greencoats shook themselves out into a skirmish line.

"Time's up," the chief announced. The line moved forward. Dixon took off his spectacles and stuck them in the hip pocket of his breeches. Sometimes these affairs stayed polite, sometimes they didn't. The world turned blurry.

A greencoat emerged out of the blur. He was carrying a club. His voice conversational, matter-of-fact, he asked Dixon, "You going to take off, kid?"

Before he answered, he heard Melody loudly say "No" to what had to have been the same question. That killed the few shreds of hesitation he had left. "No," he said, trying to sound as firm as Melody had.

The greencoat only shrugged. "I arrest you, then, for constituting a danger to public order." Formal language done, he went on, "Come along quietly?"

"Sure."

"All right, then. Put down your sign—you won't get an extra trash-strewing charge on account of it." Dixon did. He put his spectacles back



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on. The greencoat waited till he was done, then gave him a light shove. "Over that way. Come on." He sounded more bored than anything else, Dixon thought, a little resentfully. Justice for sims was too important to be handled as part of someone's routine.

Even with his spectacles, Dixon did not see what went wrong. Maybe a protester whacked a greencoat with a picket sign. Maybe a greencoat thought one was going to, and swung first. Maybe a greencoat swung first for the hell of it.

However it happened, it happened fast. What had been a civil process turned ugly all at once. Demonstrators swung at greencoats, and pushed them away when they tried to arrest them. Like the genie in the legend, once violence was out of the bottle, it did not want to go back in.

The greencoat who was urging Ken Dixon along suddenly pushed him in the back, hard. He went down to his knees. His carefully replaced spectacles flew off his nose. He heard a crunch as a greencoat running toward the brewing fight smashed them with his boot.

Melody screamed as she got the same treatment he just had. "Leave her alone!" he shouted. He tried to get to his feet to go help her.

A club exploded against the side of his head. He went down. He tried to get up again, but his legs didn't want to do what he told them. He had made it to all fours when a greencoat landed on him, knocking him down again.

"You're not going anywhere!" the greencoat bawled in his ear. It was *his* greencoat; he recognized the voice. He was irrationally pleased he was able to recognize anything.

The greencoat yanked his arms out from under him. His chin hit the pavement. The greencoat jerked his arms behind his back, clapped manacles on his wrists. He had thought the roaring pain in his head left him immune to other hurts. The bite of the manacles' metal teeth convinced him otherwise in a hurry.

"*Now* come on, you stinking sim-lover!" the greencoat shouted. He hauled Dixon to his feet, frogmarched him toward a constabulary motorcoach. Two more greencoats were waiting at the steps. They grabbed him, flung him inside.

He almost fell over somebody inside the motorcoach. A moment later, somebody almost fell over him. Crawling with his hands locked behind him was almost impossible. Because he had to, he managed to lurch his way up onto one of the motorcoach's hard, comfortless seats.

"Are you all right, Ken?" He hadn't even seen Melody on the seat in front of him. Concern in her voice, she went on, "You're bleeding."

"I suppose so," he said vaguely; he felt something warm and wet trickling down his cheek and jaw. He leaned his head against the bar-


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reinforced glass of the window. Then he looked at Melody again. Above one ear, blood matted her short, sandy hair. "So are you."

"I know." Despite the blow she'd taken, she still had her wits about her, and she was furious. "The bastard groped me, too, when he was wrestling with me to get the manacles on. I clawed him pretty good, I think, before he finally managed to."

"Good for you." Dixon leaned against the window again; talking and thinking hurt. Someone sat down beside him. He hardly noticed. He was watching the greencoats finishing off the demonstration. Protesters outnumbered constables, but the contest was never in doubt. The demonstrators hesitated before they fought, and when they did it was by ones and twos. The greencoats did not hesitate at all, and worked together. A few demonstrators managed to flee; most were seized and hauled off to the motorcoaches.

"Maybe it's for the best," Melody said. "This way our side of the message is sure to reach the television news tonight, along with Dr. Howard's rationalizations."

"Maybe," was all Dixon could manage. After a while, the greencoats slammed the motorcoach's doors shut. Its engine roared to life. It rattled through the streets of Philadelphia, toward the lockup.

The two sims separated. Matt lay back on the bed. The female—it was the one called Jane, Dr. Howard saw when she turned her face toward the monitor camera—stayed on hands and knees beside him. After a surprisingly short time, Matt's vigor returned. He got behind her and fell to again.

"Don't they ever quit?" a technician asked, pointing at the screen. A whole bank of monitors let the investigators at the Disease Research Center watch the sims they studied without disturbing them.

"What else do they have to do?" Howard asked. "They aren't likely to sit around reading books, you know."

The technician laughed, but persisted, "This is the third time they've been at it today, and it's only"—he glanced at his pocket watch—"a little past two."

Howard shrugged. "Weren't you ever a randy eighteen-year-old? That's what Matt is, or the equivalent—sims age a little faster than we do, so he's probably about at his peak now at fourteen. And up until not so long ago he was deathly ill, so I dare say he's making up for lost time, too."

"Well, maybe," the technician said. Howard walked down the row of television screens to check on some of the other sims at the DRC. The technician muttered under his breath, "No way I could have gone that hard, even when I was eighteen, especially if my girl was that ugly."


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Howard knew he was not supposed to hear, but turned back anyway. "Jane looks as good to Matt as the lead in *Vixens in Love* does to you."

"That's *his* problem," the technician retorted. Howard knew he had a picture of that particular blonde taped above his desk.

"I'm glad he has the urge back," the doctor said. "It shows the effectiveness of the HIVI in returning him to good health."

"Almost," the technician reminded him. "What I'm glad of is that Jane already carries the AIDS virus too, because no matter how good Matt feels, he's still got the virus in him and he can still spread it, right?"

"Yes," Howard said reluctantly. "That's the main drawback to HIVI at the moment: it can let carriers go on transmitting AIDS, giving it to people who will pass it on in turn."

"In some ways, you know, that strikes me as worse than no cure at all," the technician said.

Howard wished the man would shut up and let him go away. He was putting his finger on just the problem that most worried the doctor. Luckily, none of the reporters in Philadelphia had, or a triumphant news conference might have turned embarrassing in a hurry.

Being who he was, though, Howard could not simply shove the comment aside. He paused to pick his words with care. "It depends. As far as checking the epidemic goes, I suppose you're right. But if my blood test just came back positive, I'd scream bloody murder if somebody said I couldn't have HIVI."

"I can't argue with you there," the technician admitted, and the doctor took advantage of the moment of agreement to leave.

A fresh batch of calc printouts was on his desk: analyses of the effectiveness of a variant of HIVI at restoring the immune system and protecting T-cells. The variant wasn't as good as the basic drug. Howard made a note to assign writing up the new datum to somebody so it could get into print. Negative information was information too—now some other lab would not have to waste time checking this new subtype.

It wouldn't be the sort of publication a news conference accompanied, though.

Howard put his head in his hands. He wished he'd never called the bloody conference in the first place. That was exactly the word for it: dozens of people had been hurt in what turned into a riot outside the Hall of the Popular Assembly. Consul Bryan had called for an investigation of the way the constabulary handled it, and Consul Jennings promptly vetoed the call. It was the worst falling-out the two chief executives had had in their term.

Howard did not care about that; politics meant nothing to him. He cared very much about hurt people, though. Had he known the protest


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outside would cause so many of them, he never would have gone up to Philadelphia.

He sat up straight. No, that wasn't true. AIDS hurt more people than riots ever would. The only way to fight it was with research. Research took denairs, lots of them, and the best way to latch on to them was by shouting every piece of progress, even one as ambiguous as HIVI, to the housetops.

The intercom buzzed. He jumped, and was glad no one was with him to see it. "Mr. Tanaka is here to see you, sir," his secretary said.

"Oh, yes, of course. Thank you, Doris. Send him in." Howard ran fingers through his thick brown hair. Joseph Tanaka had no official standing, but he had been friends with Consul Jennings since they were at middle school together. "Jennings' eyes," the papers called him these days.

Doris opened the door for Tanaka. Howard rose to shake his hand. Tonaka had a strong grip, and looked a few years younger in person than in photos—he was, of course, almost exactly the consul's age. His sturdy, middle-aged oriental features somehow went well with the conservative blue velvet jacket and maroon ruffled shirt he wore.

"Good of you to take time from your busy schedule, Dr. Howard." Tanaka's voice was deep, almost gravelly, his manner straightforward.

"A pleasure." Howard waved to a chair. "Won't you sit down?"

Tanaka did not. "I was hoping you'd show me around first."

"Certainly." Straightforward indeed, Howard thought. "Follow me, then." He gave Tanaka a quick tour of the DRC laboratories, ending with the bank of screens that monitored the infected sims. The technician, fortunately, had sense enough to keep his mouth shut.

When they were back in Howard's office, Tanaka did at last take a seat. "Most interesting," he said, steepling his fingers, "especially the sims' quarters. I must say, you treat them well."

"Certainly we do," Howard said. "For one example, they eat the same food as our staff buys at the cafeteria we passed through."

Tanaka gave a wry chuckle. "From what I know of cafeterias, that's not necessarily a recommendation. Still, I see your point. You do well by the sims, as I said already." He turned serious again. "Of course, you've also given them AIDS."

"Mr. Tanaka," Howard said stiffly, "this research program operates under laws passed by the Popular Assembly with funds appropriated by the Senate. Neither consul saw fit to affix his veto to the laws or the appropriations. I assure you, I am conforming to them in every particular."

"I do not doubt that for a moment, Dr. Howard," Tanaka said. "What I've come to see is the result of that conformity. After all, though they


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are not human beings, sims do have their own smaller measure of intelligence, and they did not consent to be experimented on."

Appalled, Howard burst out, "A sim cannot give informed consent! That's a fundamental principle of law."

"Not quite what I meant," Tanaka said. "I doubt they are eager to die, though, of a disease they almost certainly would not have contracted in the normal course of their lives. Many people not usually supportive of the sim justice movement—" He paused to let Howard make some uncomplimentary remark, but the doctor stayed quiet. Shrugging, Tanaka went on, "—still have qualms at their being infected with AIDS."

Howard had dealt with officials for years, and had no trouble translating what they said into what they meant. Tanaka was talking about votes. The doctor took a moment to make sure his reply informed without antagonizing: "They also have qualms, Mr. Tanaka, about being infected themselves, and two or three million of them have been. Of those, somewhere around a third—maybe more, as time goes by—will actually develop AIDS. And just about all of those will die, very unpleasantly. The people who show no symptoms are just as able to pass it on through sex as the ones who do—more able, because the ones without symptoms still feel fine. Sims give me my best chance of fighting AIDS in people. How can I do anything but use them?"

"What would you do if there were no sims?" Tanaka asked after thinking a few seconds himself.

"The best I could," Howard answered. "Muddle along with shimpanses and a lot of *in vitro* work, I suppose. It wouldn't be the same. I think you've seen that here. A lot more people would die while I—and a lot of other researchers using sims, don't forget—struggled to translate the answers we eventually got into clinical terms. We don't have that problem with sims—their biochemistry is almost identical to ours."

Tanaka nodded and rose, showing the meeting was done. He stuck out his hand. "Thank you very much, Dr. Howard. You've been most interesting."

"Have I? I'm glad. What will you tell Consul Jennings, then?"

Tanaka blinked. "You're very forthright."

"I'm concerned about my program, sir."

"Reluctantly, Dr. Howard, I have to say you needn't be. I don't think the Consul will be happy when I tell him that, but you've made your points well. You also might have given me another answer to my question just now, in which case I would have said something different to Consul Jennings."

Honestly puzzled, Howard asked, "What might I have said?"

"When I asked what you'd do without sims, you might have suggested going on with human defectives."


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The doctor felt his face freeze. "Good day, Mr. Tanaka. Someone, I am certain, will show you out." He sat down abruptly.

"I understand your reaction, Dr. Howard. As I said, you passed the test nicely. The idea revolts me quite as much as it does you, I assure you. But I had to know."

"Good day," Howard repeated, unmollified. Nodding, Tanaka left. Howard was so filled with fury tht he did not care whether he had hurt the DRC politically. He did not think he had; Tanaka plainly felt as he did.

He was also, he realized, furious at himself, and took a long while to figure out why. When he did, he wished he hadn't. If there were no sims, who could say what he might do to take a crack at AIDS? And who could say whether he would be able to look at himself in a mirror afterwards? He was not grateful to Tanaka for showing him a part of himself he would sooner have left unseen.

He got very little work done the rest of the day.

The air waggon pulled slowly to a stop outside Terminus. When it was not moving anymore, a steward opened the door. Ken Dixon got his shoulder bag out from under his seat, worked his way up the aisle. "Thanks for breaking trail for me," Melody Porter said from behind him.

"My pleasure," he said, adding "Oof!" a moment later as another passenger stuck an accidental elbow in his belly. He turned his head back toward Melody. "You'll forgive me if I omit the gallant bow."

"This once," she said graciously. He snorted.

"Have a pleasant stay in Terminus," the steward said as Dixon walked by, and then again to Melody.

They walked out of the air waggon's cooled air and into the furious muggy heat of a Terminus August afternoon. "What's the matter?" Melody asked when Dixon suddenly stopped halfway down the descent ladder. In less polite voices, other passengers behind them asked the same thing.

"Sorry. My spectacles just steamed up." Dixon took them off his nose, peered at them in nearsighted wonder, and stuck them in his hip pocket. Holding tight to the rail, he went carefully down the rest of the ladder.

Once down on the ground, he was relieved to discover that the fog dissipated as his spectacles reached the same sweltry temperature as their surroundings. He put them back on. When they went inside the cooled station building, he let out a blissful sigh.

Melody echoed him, adding, "Philadelphia summer is bad, but this—"

"—Is worse," he finished. Walking twenty yards had left him covered with a sweaty film. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

Through the station building's broad sweep of plate glass, he and Melody watched a human boss supervise the gang of sims that was loading



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baggage from the air waggon onto carts. He shook his head. "The seventeenth century, alive and well in the twentieth," he said scornfully.

"Well," someone with an amused voice said at his elbow, "you sound like the chap I'm looking for. Look like him, too," the young man added.

He looked the way the Philadelphia committee said he should: a tall man with a good many blacks in his ancestry who wore a thick mustache. "You're Patrick?" Dixon asked, as he had been told to do.

"Sorry, no; Stephen's the name," the fellow said. They nodded at each other. Amateurs' games, Dixon thought, but good enough—he hoped—for the moment. Later—later was another matter. He put it aside.

"Here comes the luggage." Melody had been watching the sims tossing bags onto the conveyor belt.

They walked over to it. Stephen nudged Dixon. "Is she really the one who's his great-granddaughter?" he whispered, not wanting her to hear.

"Great-great, yeah."

"Whoa." The respect in Stephen's voice and eyes was just this side of awe. Dixon's lingering doubts cleared up. No infiltrator could be that impressed over her ancestry.

He and Melody had boarded the air waggon early; their bags, naturally, were among the last ones out, having been buried beneath everyone else's. "So much for efficiency," Melody sighed when she had hers. Dixon's finally appeared a couple of minutes after that.

"Come on," Stephen said. He led them to an omnibus with PEACHTREE STREET on the destination placard. It roared off, a little more than half full, about ten minutes later, and was, Dixon discovered thankfully, cooled.

Stephen rose from his seat at a stop on Peachtree Street, in the midst of a neighborhood with many more apartment blocks than private houses. Dixon thought himself ready for the blast of heat that would greet him when he got off the omnibus, and was almost right.

"The collegium is over there," Stephen said, pointing west; Dixon could see a couple of tall buildings over the tops of the apartments. "In this neighborhood, no one will pay any attention to you; everybody will figure you're just a couple of new students here for the start of fall term."

"Good," Melody said briskly. She turned around, trying to orient herself. "Where's the DRC from here? That way?"

Stephen gave her a respectful glance. "Yes, northwest of here, maybe three or four miles."

"Good," she said again. "We'll be staying with you, I gather, until we get down to business?"

"That's right. People float in and out of my cube all the time; the landlord's used to it. As long as he gets paid on the first every month and nobody screams too loud, he doesn't care. Half the cubes in his block



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are like that." Stephen started walking down the street. "Come on. It's this way."

Following, Dixon asked, "How alert are they likely to be at the DRC?"

"Not very, I hope. Since the word came down from Philadelphia that this was going to happen, Terminus hasn't heard much from us about justice for sims. We've been quiet, just letting everybody relax and think we've forgotten what we're for."

"Outstanding," Dixon said. "If they were alert, either this wouldn't work at all or a lot of people might end up hurt on account of us, which wouldn't do the cause any good."

"No," Stephen agreed. "But we have made the two connections we'll need most: one in the calc department, the other in food services."

"The calc department I can see, but why food services?"

Stephen told him why. He grinned. Melody laughed out loud.

Stephen turned off the street, led them into an apartment block and up three flights of stairs. By the time they got to the fourth floor, Dixon was sweating for reasons that had nothing to do with Terminus' climate. "My arms'll be as long as a shimpanse's if I have to carry these bags one more flight," he complained.

"You don't. We're here." Stephen had his key out, and opened the door to his cube. "Here, this will help." He turned on the cooler. Nodding gratefully, Dixon set down his bags and shut the door behind him and Melody.

The cube was not big; the luggage Dixon had dropped and the two bedrolls on the floor effectively swallowed the living room. A table covered with what looked like floor plans was shoved into one corner. Melody made a beeline for that. Dixon was content just to stand and rest for a minute.

Stephen handed him a glass of iced coffee. He gulped it down so fast it made his sinuses hurt. "Thanks," he said, squeezing his eyes shut to try to make the pain go away.

"No problem." Stephen's eyes traveled to the bedrolls. He lowered his voice a little. "I don't know what kind of arrangement the two of you have, but I'm not here all the time."

Dixon looked at Melody, who was engrossed in architectural drawings. "I don't quite know either," he said quietly. "I was sort of hoping this trip would let me find out."

"Like that, eh? All right. Like I said, I'll be gone a lot. I expect you'll have the chance to learn."

"Chance to learn what?" Melody looked up from the floor plans, beckoned. "Come over here, the two of you. Stephen, just how much support can we count on from your people here? If we can put folks in a couple


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of places at the same time, we may actually bring this off. If I read this right, we can get in and out *here* pretty fast."

They bent over the plans together.

The night guard's footsteps echoed down the quiet hallway. But for him, it was empty. He was sleepy and bored. He turned a corner. Gray light from the bank of monitors lit the corridor ahead. The night technician was leaning back in his swivel chair, reading a paperback. He looked bored too.

"Hello, Edward," the guard said. "Slow here tonight."

"Isn't it, though, Lloyd?" The technician put the book down on his thigh, open, so he could keep his place. "Place is like a morgue when the calcs go haywire—everybody packs it in and goes home early."

Lloyd nodded, not quite happily. "Getting so no one can think anymore without the damn gadgets to help 'em." He glanced at the screens. "That's something sims don't have to worry about."

"Just swive and sleep and eat," Edward agreed. "It could be worse." Then, because he was a fair-minded man, he added, "A lot of times it is—especially when the new drugs go thumbs-down."

"AIDS." Like everyone else at the DRC, the guard made it a swear word. "How's he doing?"

Having been free of symptoms for eight months now on HIVI, Matt was a being to conjure with in these halls. Everyone worried over him. The technician perfectly understood Lloyd's concern. "He's fine—just worn out from the females again."

"Good." Lloyd yawned till the hinge of his jaw cracked like a knuckle. His eyes shifted from the monitors to a coffeepot on a hot plate. "I need another cup of that."

"I'll join you." Edward got up and poured for both of them.

"Thanks." The guard sipped. He made a face. "Give me some sugar, will you? It's bitter tonight—tastes like it's been sitting in the pot for a week."

"It is viler than usual, isn't it?" The technician added cream and sugar to his own brew.

Lloyd finished, tossed his cup at a trashcan under the coffeepot. He missed, muttered to himself, and bent to pick up the cup. Then he ambled down the hall.

He yawned again, even wider than before. He glared back toward the technician's station. The coffee hadn't done him much good, had it?

He put a hand on the wall of the corridor. For some reason, he did not feel very steady on his feet. Before he knew what was happening, he found himself sliding to the tile floor. He opened his mouth to call for help. Only a snore came out.


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In front of the monitors, the technician lolled in his chair, his head thrown back bonelessly. The paperback lay under the swivel chair's wheels where it had fallen. Its cover was bent.

Terminus night was as hot as Terminus day, with the added pleasure of mosquitoes. Crouched on the wide lawn outside the DRC complex, Dixon was trying to keep his swearing to whispers as he slapped at bugs. "When do we go?" he asked for the fourth time, as if he were a small child impatient to set out on a trip.

One of the lighted windows in the big building went dark for a moment, then lit again. "Now," Melody said at last. "Good luck to all of us."

People rose and ran forward, their feet scuffing softly on the grass. Automatic doors hissed open, leading into a passage that bent sharply. Out of sight from outside was a guard station. A guard slept in the chair; a cup of coffee had spilled on the desk in front of him.

The fluorescent lights overhead made Stephen's teeth gleam whitely as he grinned. "Food services," he said. Also grinning, Dixon nodded and gave him a thumbs-up.

"We split here," Melody declared, refusing to be distracted even for a moment. "Stephen, your group goes that way, toward elevator B. Bring back as much HIVI and as many syringes and needles as you can get your hands on."

"Right." He and two other young men dashed away.

"Out of here in fifteen minutes, or you get left behind," Melody called after them. Then she turned to Dixon and the young woman—they knew her only as Dee—with him. "Now we head up ourselves and get Matt."

The elevators right across from the guard station went up to the sim ward. Dixon thumbed the UP button. A door whooshed open. The three raiders—no, liberators, Dixon thought—crowded in.

He hit *14* a moment before Melody got it on the other panel. The door closed. Acceleration pushed against the soles of his shoes.

The door opened again. "How convenient," Melody said as they tumbled out—the bank of monitor screens was in the same position on floor 14 as the guard station on the ground floor. The man in the chair in front of them was as solidly out as the guard down below.

"Good—the screens have room numbers under them. That's the one thing I wasn't sure of," Dixon said. "Is that Matt?"

"Let's see," Melody said, coming up beside him and following his pointing finger. "Yes, that's him. Room—1427–B, is it? Let's go."

NO ENTRY WITHOUT AUTHORIZED ACCOMPANIMENT, read a large sign above closed double doors. Dixon tried them. They were locked. "Figured as much," he said. He stepped aside. "All yours, Dee."

She didn't speak; she never said much, as far as Dixon could tell. She



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was a locksmith by trade, though, and carried a set of picks on her belt. Her motions were quick and sure. In less than a minute, she had the doors open. "Come on," she said.

They went quietly, not wanting to disturb any of the sleeping sims but Matt. "1427-B," Melody said, stopping. Dee took a step toward the door, but Melody was already trying it. Melody raised a hand in triumph, like a cricketeer after a century.

Matt woke to the sound of the opening door. His wide mouth fell open in surprise when he saw three strange humans coming in. *Who?* he signed. *What?*

"Henry Quick was my great-great-grandfather," Melody said, voice hardly above a whisper. Her fingers echoed her words.

*"Hoo!"* It was the voice sims made when they were impressesd or interested. Dixon shook his head in wonder; he had lost track of how many times he had seen that reaction when Melody said who she was. Somehow all sims everywhere knew that Henry Quick had been the first man who worked to give them justice.

*What?* Matt signed again. *Why you here?*

"To make you free," Dixon said. As Melody had—as anyone did who communicated with sims—he repeated his spoken words with signtalk. "Come with us. Do you want to spend the rest of your life cooped up in here?"

Matt shrugged. *Food good. Females here. Feel good now. Not sick.*

Dixon scowled. That wasn't the answer he was looking for. Melody asked quietly, "Do you want to be sick again? You probably will, if you stay here. Do you remember what it was like when you were sick?"

The question was not quite rhetorical; like very young children, sims often let the past recede quickly. But Dixon saw that what Matt had undergone was not something he would easily forget. The sim's nostrils flared in alarm; under his brow ridges, his eyes went wide. *No!* he signed, and vehemently shook his head. He climbed off the bed. *I come with you.*

"Good," Dee said. She turned and started down the hall. Melody and Matt followed. Dixon came with them a moment later, after leaving a souvenir on the bed to give Dr. Howard something to think about.

They hurried out through the double doors. Dee locked them again. This time, riding the elevator made Dixon feel briefly light.

*"Hoo!"* Matt said again when they were down in the lobby. He pointed at the unconscious guard there, signed, *Not to be asleep.*

"That's what he thought," Dixon said. Matt looked at him in confusion. "Never mind. Come on."

They dashed out of the DRC and ran toward one of the two horselesses parked on the roadway close to the edge of the lawn. It was not, strictly


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speaking, a legal place to park, but traffic regulations were not likely to be enforced in the wee small hours.

One of the horselesses sped off. As it passed under a street lamp, Dixon saw it was crowded with people. Triumph flared in him. "They must have got the HIVI! And we've got Matt!"

The driver of the remaining horseless threw open the door across from him. *In*, Melody signed to Matt. She, Dixon, and Dee came piling after the sim. No sooner had Dee slammed the door than the driver roared away from the curb.

Dixon started to say something to the sim, but before he could, Melody leaned over to him and kissed him for a long time. When she finally let him go, by some miracle he remembered what he had been about to tell Matt: "Free! You're free at last!"

That got him kissed again, which was, he thought dizzily, a long way from bad.

" 'Free,' " Dr. Peter Howard read. It was the last word of the pamphlet on Matt's bed, printed twice as big and black as any of the others. In Howard's mouth, it sounded obscene. Normally among the most self-controlled of men, he savagely crumpled the pamphlet and flung it to the floor.

The security man who picked it up gave him a reproachful look. "There might have been useful evidence there, doctor."

"Oh, shut up," Howard snarled. "Where the hell were you people when this sim was stolen? Asleep on the job, that's where!"

"The guards were drugged, Dr. Howard," the security man corrected stiffly. "Our investigation into that part of the affair is just beginning."

"Wonderful." Howard turned away. Slowly, clumsily, he made his way down the hall. Getting out of the way for other people seemed more trouble that it was worth. It's as if I were one of the walking wounded, he thought, and then, a moment later, I am.

He sat behind his desk, but could not pretend, not today, that the broad expanse of walnut was a fortress wall to hold the outside world outside. In a bigger sense, he had used the whole DRC the same way. Well, the outside world had invaded with a vengeance.

And with such stupidity, he thought, filled with rage that was all the more consuming for having no outlet. He had only skimmed the pamphlet the thieves left behind to explain their handiwork, but he had seen and heard the phrases there often enough over the years.

His fists clenched till nails bit into flesh. At the pain, he opened them again; no matter how furious he was, he stayed careful of his hands. But it was not, was not, was *not* his fault that sims were as they were. In earlier days, he knew, people had thought other races of people to be



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inferior breeds. Sims did that much, at least, to stop man's inhumanity to man, by showing what an inferior breed really was like.

The security man stuck his head into the office, breaking Howard's chain of thought. "Outside greencoats are here to see you, sir," he said.

"Send them in," Howard sighed. Normally, Terminus' regular constabulary stayed away from the DRC. Normally, Howard thought—he would not get to use that word again any time soon.

No sooner had the greencoat—actually, the fellow was in ordinary clothes, blue breeches and a yellow tunic—come in than the phone chimed. "Excuse me," Howard said, thinking, everything happens at once. The greencoat nodded.

Howard picked up the phone. An excited voice said in his ear, "This is Butler, at the Terminus *Constitution*. We've had a report that a sim with AIDS has been taken from the Disease Research Center—Hello? Is that you, Dr. Howard? Are you there?"

"I'm here," Howard said. No point in breaking the connection. Like the greencoat in his office, this Butler was only the first of many.

Matt was confused. Dealing with people often left him feeling that way, but he had lived in his old home in the tower for a long time, and mostly knew what to expect. With these new people, he had no idea what was coming next.

Shaking his head, he got out of bed—the third new, strange, not quite comfortable bed he'd had in as many nights—and used the toilet. He had to strain to make the urine go through his penis, which was stiff with a morning erection. Stiffer than usual, even; he missed the females with whom he'd been living.

He flushed the toilet, sat down on it to comb his red-brown hair. That was another reason he missed the females—there was a big patch on his back that he could not reach. In the towers, sims by twos and threes would spend a lot of time combing each other all over. It was something to do.

He sniffed, and felt his broad nostrils expand with pleasure. Breakfast was cooking—sausages today, from the smell. He liked sausages.

He went out to the kitchen. The man and woman who had taken him from the tower were there, along with the strange man and woman whose house this was. They were all drinking coffee. They looked up when he came in.

*Good morning,* he signed.

"Good morning," the people replied, with mouths and hands. "Help yourself," added the woman who lived here—Emily was her name, he remembered.

He nodded his thanks. Along with the sausages were sweet rolls and



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slices of apple. He filled his plate, took a glass of water (he did not care for coffee).

Behind him, Emily's mate Isaac whistled and said, "Certainly nothing wrong with his appetite now."

"We've noticed that," replied Ken, one of the ones who had taken him away. "Hope it won't put you to too much trouble."

"Don't worry," Isaac said.

Matt sat down at the table and started to eat. Emily said, "We're proud to help keep him out of the DRC, folks, and taking him was a grand gesture. But do you know what you'll do with him in the end?"

"We were thinking of getting him to one of the preserves and setting him loose there," Ken said, "but—" His voice trailed away.

"—With the AIDS virus still in him, we can't do that," Melody finished for him. "Not without spreading AIDS among the wild sims."

People often talked around sims as if they could not understand spoken words because they could not say them. Matt put down his fork so he could sign, *Feel good.*

"We know you do, Matt," Melody said gently, touching his hand for a moment with her small hairless one. "But no matter how good you feel, you *aren't* well. The sickness is still inside you."

She and Ken had said that before. It made no sense to Matt. If he did not feel sick, how could he be sick? *Feel good,* he repeated. He watched the humans roll their eyes and shrug. He shrugged too.

"There's another problem," Ken added: "He'll only feel well for as long as we have HIVI for him." He looked down at his hands. "Maybe we should have thought a little longer about that, for his sake."

"We did the best we could," Melody said. "He's out now. They can't do any more experimenting on him. He's free, for as long as we can keep him that way."

Matt had heard almost identical talk every day since he left the towers. It was about him, he knew, but it did not seem to connect to him.

Then Isaac said something new: "I don't think we can keep him free. We can keep him away from the doctors, sure, but only he can make himself free."

Dixon scowled; Melody rose abruptly from the table. "We'll be taking off soon, I think." Even Matt, who did not use speech himself, could hear the anger in her voice.

He ate another sausage. *Free* was one of the many words people used that gave him trouble. Ideas like *bread* or *cat* or *green* or *jump* or *sideways* were easy enough to deal with. He could even count, though sometimes he had trouble remembering which number went with how many things or whether he had attached a number to all the things in the group he happened to be counting.



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But he could not eat *free* or see it or do it. The closest he could come to it in his own mind was *do whatever I want.* Right now he was full and felt well. He wouldn't have minded coupling, but Ken and Melody had taken him away from his females and he found human women ugly. Still, he was reasonably content. Did that make him *free*? He didn't know.

"Come on, Matt," Melody said. "We have to get moving. We've imposed on these good people quite enough, that's obvious." She walked out of the kitchen.

"Don't take it that way, Melody," Emily said. "Isaac just—"

"Never mind," Ken said, before anyone else could talk. "You put us up for the night, and we're grateful. We all share wanting to make things better for sims, and that's enough, isn't it?"

Nobody said anything. Matt wondered what the answer to the question was. In the towers, people had wanted answers to questions all the time, and were upset when they didn't get them. But Ken and Melody and Isaac and Emily were just leaving this one lying around. Matt shook his head at the vagaries of people.

Melody came back wearing rubber gloves and carrying a razor and a syringe. "Give me your arm, Matt," she said.

*Not need,* he protested. *Feel good.*

He had said the same thing back in the towers, and had the same success with it: none. "Give me your arm," Melody repeated. "You want to keep feeling good, don't you?"

He nodded resignedly and held out his right arm. The hair on its underside had been shaved a few days before he left the tower, but it was growing in again. The razor scraped it away, leaving a long, narrow stretch of pinkish-brown skin exposed. Now Melody could see exactly where to put the needle.

Matt's lips skinned back from his teeth in a grimace of pain. The people in the towers were much better at using the syringe. They hardly hurt him at all. Finally, the ordeal was done. Melody left the syringe on the table. "Boil it or put it in a glass full of bleach before you throw it away," she said to Emily and Isaac. "Make sure you get rid of the virus."

*Not sick, nothing wrong,* Matt signed, adding a moment later, *But arm hurts.*

"We're glad you feel all right," Melody said, smiling in a way that made her seem more appealing to Matt than she had before, "but the virus is still in your blood. We don't want to take any risk of its spreading."

Matt sighed. The people in the tower had talked that way, too, but it made no sense to him. *Blood is blood,* he signed.

"Never mind," Ken said again. "Let's get going."

Matt accompanied him and Melody out to the horseless in front of



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Emily's and Isaac's house. Isaac stayed behind inside. Emily waved from the porch. The morning sun glinted off a gold front tooth.

Ken started the horseless. He and Melody shared the front seat; Matt had the back to himself. "Springfield?" Ken asked as he pulled out into traffic.

"Springfield," Melody agreed. "I've got the town map here."

"We won't need that for a few hours," he said. "All I need to worry about now is finding my way to Via LXVI westbound."

Matt listened to the two people with half an ear at best. He watched houses, trees, open spaces go by. That wasn't very interesting, either. He'd done too much of it already, the last few days. After a while, one house, one tree, one open space looked like another. If anything could be more boring for him than traveling in a horseless, he had no idea what it was.

His eyes tried to glaze, but even that was denied him; it was too early in the day for him to fall asleep. He played with his fingers for a bit. That soon palled. He started to stroke himself, then stopped. For some reason, he knew, people did not like anyone doing that out in the open.

He started to sing instead. His song had no words; his tongue and lips could not shape them. But the hoots and grunts he let out in their place had rhythm of a sort, a rhythm he made plainer by pounding on his thighs with the palms of his hands. His head bobbed happily. As far as he was concerned, it was a fine song.

He was the only one who thought so. Before very long, Ken burst out, "Will you please stop that infernal racket?"

Matt subsided; he was used to obeying people. But he was not pleased about it this time. He held up his hands so Ken could see them in the mirror. *Like my song,* he signed grumpily.

"Is that what you call it?" Ken said. "I don't."

Matt held up his hands again. *Not free to sing?* he asked. *Not free?*

Ken almost drove off the road. "Watch where you're going," Melody exclaimed. "What's the matter with you?" Ken told her what the matter was; she laughed and laughed. She turned round in her seat so she could sign with Matt as well as speak to him. "Sing all you like."

He opened his mouth to begin again, then paused. *Why laugh?* he asked.

"Because—because—" Melody stopped, finally resuming, "Because we do want to help sims be freer, but it still surprised us to have a sim — you—use the word to us."

Matt made an uncertain noise deep in his throat. That didn't seem very funny to him. He gave up and started to sing again. Ken made a noise remarkably similar to his, but didn't say anything.

They got to Springfield before noon; Ken drove around for a while,



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trying to find the next safe house. "Fancier part of town than I expected," he observed. The house was bigger than the ones where they had stayed before, and the yard had a fence around it, but Matt, who was used to the immense DRC towers, remained unimpressed. He yawned. If riding all day in a horseless was the way to freedom, he was beginning to doubt that he wanted any part of it.

His boredom fell away as he walked through the front gate. A female sim of about his own age was on her hands and knees in front of the house, weeding in a flowerbed. *"Hoo!"* he said enthusiastically.

The female looked over her shoulder and smiled at him. *"Hoo!"* she said back. Her backside twitched a little.

"Uh-oh," Ken and Melody said at the same time. Matt paid little attention to them. Something else was on his mind.

A plump middle-aged man came out on the front porch of the house. "Hello, my friends," he said. "I'm glad to see you. I'm Saul. Rhoda is on the phone, but she'll be out in a moment, I'm sure."

"Glad to see you, Saul." Ken nodded toward the female sim. "And who is this?"

"Lucy?" Saul frowned. Then he looked from her to Matt. Matt saw that Saul was not looking at his face. He looked down at himself. His enthusiasm was quite visible. "Oh," Saul said. "I see."

"Yes," Ken said. He did not sound happy.

"Well," Saul said, and let that hang for a while before resuming as if with happy inspiration, "let's go inside and eat lunch. After that we can see what comes up." He looked at Matt again, and broke into a laugh that sounded anything but cheerful.

The prospect of food was almost enough to divert Matt from Lucy. He went with Ken and Melody to join Saul and go inside with only a brief sidewards glance at the female sim.

Lucy put down the trowel she had been using and started to follow everyone else in. Matt felt a smile spread over his face. Food, a female—maybe this was what Ken and Melody meant by *freedom*. He had had this much back in the tower, but outside, at least, no one did hurtful things to him, save for the injection each morning. He'd had that before too, along with much else, none of it pleasant. Getting away from those proddings, pokings, and stickings even made long stretches of riding in a horseless seem not too bad.

But then he heard Saul say, "Lucy, why don't you stay outside and finish what you're doing? Rhoda will bring you something soon, I'm sure."

Matt let out an indignant grunt and sent a look of appeal to Ken and Melody. He was surprised and dismayed when they sided with Saul. "Come on, Matt," Ken said. "Lunch first. We'll worry about everything else later."



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Sulkily, Lucy went back to work. Before she did, though, she gave Matt a glance full of promise from beneath her brow ridges. He let himself be steered into the house, but all he noticed about lunch was that there was a lot of it. He ended up not being hungry anymore, but with no idea of what he'd eaten.

After a while, Lucy did come in, to use the toilet. Before she could get into the same room as Matt, Rhoda found something for her to do out in the backyard. Again Ken and Melody failed to interfere. Matt glowered at them. This did not strike him as anything like *freedom.*

Finally he had waited as long as he could. He got up and started toward the back of the house. "The toilet isn't through that door," Ken said sharply.

Matt snorted. *Not want toilet,* he signed. *Want—* His forearm pumped graphically.

"No!" All the people in the room spoke together.

The flat refusal brought Matt up short, and also made him angry. *Yes,* he signed, nodding so vigorously that his long, chinless jaw thumped against his chest. *Want to couple. Not couple since leave tower. Want to. You, you couple, yes?* He pointed at Saul and Rhoda.

Rhoda was even rounder than her husband. She turned pink at the question, but answered, "Yes, of course we do." Saul nodded.

Matt turned to Ken and Melody. *You, you couple, yes?*

They both turned pink, and looked away from each other for a moment. "Yes, we do," Ken admitted at last. He still did not look at Melody until she reached out and took his hand in hers.

*Now female for me,* Matt signed. *I couple too.* He headed for the back door again.

"No!" everyone said again.

Now he stared at them in disbelief. *Not free to couple?* he signed. *Not free?* That had worked just this morning; he was sure it would again.

But it failed. "No, Matt," Melody told him. "I'm sorry, but you're not free to couple."

*Not free?* Matt signed, wondering if he had heard correctly. *Why not free?* When his hands had finished signing, they curled of themselves into fists. He saw Melody—and everyone else—look alarmed at that. Sims were stronger than people.

Their fear did not stop them from arguing with him, though. Ken said, "You can't couple with Lucy because you still have the AIDS virus in you. If you couple with her, you'll give her the same sicknesss you have."

*Not sick,* Matt protested. *Feel fine. Feel fine long time now. You give medicine—hurt arm—so I feel fine, yes?*

"You feel fine, yes," Melody said, "but what makes you sick is still in you, and can go out when you couple. And we have no medicine for Lucy.



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I'm sorry, Matt." She spread her hands in a gesture sims and people shared.

Matt only shook his head in reply. What she said made no sense to him. If he felt well, how could he have anything inside him that made him sick? And when he mated, the only thing that came out of him was jism. Jism was just jism. How could it make a female sick?

Besides—*In tower,* he signed, *couple with many females. They not sick now. Why this female here get sick, if they not sick now?* He grinned, pleased at his own cleverness: it was a bigger mental effort than he usually made.

The people seemed to understand that too. Ken rolled his eyes—something else that was no part of signtalk but that Matt understood—and said to no one in particular, "Just what we need—a sim who cites precedent on us."

That Matt did not follow. He did not waste time on it in any case, for Melody was saying to him, "The female sims in the DRC—in the tower—had the AIDS virus in them too, so it didn't matter if you coupled with them. They were already ill the same way you are."

*They not ill. They feel fine,* Matt signed. *Feel good.* His hips moved involuntarily as he remembered how good the females back at the tower had felt. He wanted that feeling again.

Melody still would not let him go. "Matt," she persisted, "those females in the tower were getting medicine too, just like you, weren't they?"

*Yes, and they feel fine,* Matt answered.

"This is getting us nowhere," Saul broke in. "If you're thinking of letting him couple with Lucy, you two, Rhoda and I will have to ask you to leave."

"We never would have come here if we'd known you had a female sim," Ken said. They glared at each other. Hoping he was forgotten, Matt started toward the back of the house again.

"Wait!" Melody said. Resentfully, he turned back. He was tired of her trying to tell him things that obviously weren't so. What she said, though, did not look to have anything to do with his lust for Lucy: "You remember that I'm Henry Quick's great-great-granddaughter, don't you, Matt?"

He nodded. That was one reason, and a big one, he'd gone along when she and Ken and Dee came bursting into his room in the tower. No one connected with Henry Quick could mean harm to a sim. He was sure of that.

"Then please believe me, in Henry Quick's name, when I tell you that you shouldn't couple with Lucy, or with any other female sim out here," Melody said earnestly. "Please, Matt."

He looked away from her. He did not think she was lying. He wished he did. *Not understand,* he signed.



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She sighed. "I know, Matt. Will you do as I ask anyhow?"

*Yes,* he signed, giving up with more than a twinge of regret—this Lucy was quite a desirable female. *Hand all right?* he asked.

"Is that sarcasm?" Saul asked.

"Hush," Melody said. "Of course not." She turned back to Matt. "Yes, of course using your hand is all right. . . . You might go in another room first."

Matt went, thinking grumpily that people from outside the towers, even if they were related to Henry Quick, complained about every little thing. Then he thought of Lucy again, and the heat of that thought drove from his mind any worries about people.

That evening, Dixon sat up on the guestroom bed he shared with Melody. "Poor miserable bastard," he said as he peeled off the rubber he was wearing. "I wonder if I should have offered him one of these."

"That never occurred to me." Melody sat up herself—languor afterwards was not her style. She looked interested. "Do you think he could have used one?"

Dixon had been half joking, or more than half. Now he gave it some serious thought, and regretfully shook his head. "I doubt it. I massacred a fair number of them learning how, and I suspect he wouldn't care if he tore one putting it on. Sims aren't careful over details like that."

"No, they aren't," Melody admitted, adding, "A lot of people aren't, either."

"I suppose not," Dixon said. "But if a man didn't like a rubber, he probably wouldn't take it off halfway through and go on without it. I'm afraid Matt might. That's the other reason I didn't think I ought to try to give him one."

"I'll tell you why *I* like rubbers." Melody waited for Dixon to let out a questioning grunt. Then she said, "Because with them, *you* have to go clean up."

"Harumph." In almost high dudgeon, he did just that.

When he came back to the bed, Melody was wearing a nightshirt and a serious expression. "Ken, why did you get into the sims' justice movement in the first place?"

"What brought that on?" he asked, blinking, as he sat down beside her.

"Oh, I don't know." Rather to his relief, she did not meet his eye. But she did go on even so: "I suppose it's just that you seem to keep emphasizing the way sims are different from people, and less than people, not the ways we're all the same."

"Melody, they *are* different from us," he said, as gently as he could. Her mouth went wide and thin, a sure danger sign. All the same, he



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continued, "No matter how much you want justice for sims, that doesn't mean you'll ever see one elected consul, or even see one learn to read. I've known people—not you," he added hastily, "who sometimes seem to forget that."

"I don't think you answered me. Everything you said sounds as though it ought to put you on the other side." Now she did look at him, in the same way she might have at a roach on her salad plate.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," he said in some exasperation. "Doesn't my being here count for anything? Look, as far as I can see, we have a responsibility to sims, just because they aren't as smart as we are and can't stand against us without people on their side. That's always been true, I suppose, but it's especially true now that we have machines to drudge for us instead of sims. We don't need to exploit them any more, and we shouldn't. All right? Do I pass? Can we go to sleep?"

She seemed taken aback at his vehemence, and needed a moment to collect herself and nod. "All right," she said, and turned out the light.

"Good." He lay down beside her. His outburst had startled him a little, too. He thought about what he'd said. He believed all of it. That was not the problem.

The problem, he eventually realized, was that he hadn't given Melody all his reasons. One of them was the hope of being just where he was now, in bed with her.

Would he have worked for sims' justice without that hope? He looked inside himself and decided he would. That appeased his conscience and let him slide toward sleep. More time on the road was coming tomorrow.

Doris dumped the morning's pile of mail on Dr. Howard's desk, then went back to her own station outside his office. Howard went quickly through the stack, dividing it into things he had to deal with now, things that could wait, and things that could go straight into the trash. The wastebasket gave a resounding metallic *clunk* as he got rid of the latter stack.

An insta-picture of a sim fell out of an envelope as Howard opened it. Swearing, the doctor pulled out the sheet that accompanied the photo. The lead line shouted, MATT IS STILL FREE!

Howard jabbed the intercom button with his thumb. When Doris came on, he growled, "Fetch me Coleman. We've got another one."

"Yes, Dr. Howard."

While he waited for the security chief to get there, he read through the sheet. It was much like the others that had come to the DRC—and the copies that had gone to television outlets and papers all across the Federated Commonwealths. Whoever had Matt knew how to keep reminding the country about it.



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Even some of the phrases were ones he had seen before: "no longer a victim of experimentation," "freed from the shadow of certain death in the laboratory." Howard's mouth quirked sourly. That last was an out and out lie. He knew it, and he expected that the people who had stolen Matt knew it too. He hoped they did.

The intercom buzzed. Coleman came in without waiting for Doris to go through the formalities—he and Howard had been seeing a lot of each other lately. Coleman was in his fifties, with red hair going white at the temples. His movements were quick and jerky, as if he had abundant energy seeking some kind, any kind, of outlet.

He fairly snatched the picture and sheet out of Howard's hand, then made a grab for the envelope still sitting on the doctor's desk. "Posted in Philadelphia," he noted, adding a moment later, "Different printer from the one for the text. Probably came to somebody who sent it on to us. Makes it hard to trace."

" 'Impossible' would seem a better word," Howard said.

If he hoped to get a rise out of the security man, he was disappointed. All Coleman did was nod. "Nothing we can do with it," he said gloomily. "I'll pass it on to the Terminus greencoats, but no reason to think they'll find any more on it than on any of the others."

"Meanwhile, of course, all the commentators and reporters in the country go right on giving it to us," Howard growled.

"Nothing I can do about that," Coleman said. "Long as these folks care to, they'll feed the newsies whatever they want."

"Oh, get the hell out of here," the doctor shouted at him. Unruffled, Coleman took the photo, the sheet of paper, and the envelope and left. The door closed softly behind him.

Howard stared down at his hands, ashamed at his angry outburst. Matt had been gone more than a month now, and no one was having any luck tracking him down. No one even knew what commonwealth he was in. The FCA was just too big, had too many people—and sims—to make finding ones who did not want to be found easy.

The doctor was also aware that Coleman had not been quite right. Howard knew to the hundredth of a cubic inch how much HIVI the thieves had stolen. He knew almost to the day how long that HIVI would hold off the AIDS virus in Matt.

He also knew what would happen when the HIVI was gone. For Matt's sake, he hoped the people who had him did too.

The coughing from the next room went on and on. Dixon looked at Melody, who was looking at the closed door. Worry had drawn her mouth down, put two deep lines between her eyes and other, fainter ones on her forehead. She looked, he thought, the way she would when she was



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forty. It was not the kind of thought he usually had. That endless cough, though, left him with mortality on his mind.

"The antibiotic isn't helping much," he said reluctantly. In fact, it wasn't helping at all. He and Melody both knew that, although she had not yet admitted it out loud.

He thought she would not answer him this time, either. But she did, saying, "No," in a low voice.

"It's probably not a bacterial pneumonia, then," he said. "It's the one caused by protozoans."

"Yes," Melody said, as low as before.

"Which means Matt's immune system is going south again, or he never would have come down with it," Dixon said. He wished Melody would make things easier by helping with the chain of logic, but after her two one-word comments she went back to staring moodily at the bedroom door. He would have to say it himself, then: "Which means the AIDS virus is loose in him again."

"Yes," Melody said—whispered, really. As quietly as she had spoken, she began to cry; Dixon did not realize she had until he saw tear tracks glistening on her cheeks. "Oh, Ken," she said, and then sobbed out loud for the first time, "we tried—so—hard!"

"I know. Oh, how I know." His voice was heavy. He would have lightened it, but could not. He was tasting defeat now, for the first time in his life. The young think things come easy, as if by right, that the world shapes itself to the bidding of their will. One by one, generation by generation, they learn how small a part of truth that is, how the world shapes them far more than they it.

When Melody said, "What are we going to do?" he knew what he had to answer. Knowing hurt worse than staying blind would have.

He said, "We're going to give Matt back to the DRC."

"What?" She stared at him.

"That's the only place he can get more HIVI, and without it he won't go on too long. If this round of pneumonia doesn't finish him, the next one will, or some other infection he won't be able to fight off and we can't treat. Come on, Melody, is it so or not?"

"Yes," she said grimly. AIDS was not a quick or easy way to go; too many thousands of deaths left everyone knowing that. "But they'll only go on using him as a lab rat—"

"A live one," Dixon broke in, "at least for a while, and with the HIVI he feels all right, for as long as it stays effective."

"However long that is." Melody was still fighting the idea.

"Longer than he has with us."

She flinched. "The cause—"



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"If you think the cause is worth more than what happens to one sim in particular, how are you any different from Dr. Howard?"

"That's a low blow, Ken." But she did not give him any direct reply. For some time, she did not give him any reply at all. She finally said, "Let's see what Matt has to say about it. If he wants to go back—oh, shit." It was not much of a concession, but Dixon knew it was as much as he would get.

They went to the closed door. Melody, usually impetuous, stayed behind Dixon, as if to say this was not her plan. He opened the door. They both frowned at the stale sickroom smell that met them as he did.

Matt lay on his back on the bed. He lifted his head a couple of inches when they came in, then let it fall back to the pillow, as though the effort of holding it up was too much for him. For the moment, though, he was breathing well.

He had lost weight, but had no appetite; a bowl of soup, almost full, stood untouched on the nightstand. His eyes were the only live things in his thin face. He looked, Dixon thought, like a camp survivor from the Russo-Prussian War. Dixon knew the comparison was a cliché. Nonetheless, it fit all too well.

Once inside the bedroom, Melody took the lead; Dixon's idea might have been her own, once she was with Matt. "You've stopped coughing," she said quietly. "Are you feeling any better?"

*Tired,* the sim signed. *So tired.* His arms flopped down on the mattress as soon as he was done using his hands. Then one of them came up again. *Medicine?* he asked. *Medicine that helps?*

"I'm sorry, Matt. We have none, and don't know where to get any," Melody said. Dixon winced at Matt's shrug of resignation. Melody went on, "They do have that kind of medicine at the towers, Matt, if you want to go back." Somehow she held her voice steady.

*Back home?* Matt signed, which only made Dixon feel worse—he had not thought he could. The sim's somber features brightened. *Medicine back home?* He tried to sit up and eventually succeeded, though it set off another spasm of coughing, this one fortunately brief. *Females too, yes?* he signed with a sidelong look at Dixon and Melody. *Tired of hand.*

That set Melody laughing so hard she had trouble stopping. Finally, at Dixon's quizzical look, she explained, "I read once that my great-great-grandfather used to say the only reason he ever came home from a trapping run was that he got bored with his hand."

"Oh." Dixon laughed too, a little, before turning serious again. "Matt seems to have made his choice." That brought Melody up short; after a moment, she gave a reluctant nod. He went on, "Now we have to figure out how to give him back without giving ourselves away to the greencoats. . . ."



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The intercom buzzed. "Yes, Doris?" Dr. Howard said.

"Call for you, sir," his secretary said. "Won't give a name, won't speak to anyone but you. He says it's about Matt."

"Put him on," Howard said wearily. He'd had enough lunatic calls since Matt was taken to last him a lifetime, but there was always the off chance—he picked up the phone. "Yes? This is Dr. Peter Howard. Go ahead."

The man on the other end of the line sounded young and nervous, but what he said made Howard sit straighter in his chair: "If I were a fake, would I have any way of knowing that the last three pamphlets you got were red, green, and gray, in that order?"

"No," the doctor said, excitement rising in him, "I don't believe you would. This is about Matt, you say? Where is he? Is he well? Is he alive?" The stolen HIVI should have been used up some time ago. After it was gone, anything might have happened.

"No, he's not very well, but he is alive," the caller said. "As a matter of fact, he's sitting on a bench on the corner of Peachtree and Sherman, waiting for somebody to come pick him up. We're giving him back to you."

If that was true—! Relief left Howard limp. "Thank you," he whispered.

"You're anything but welcome," the young man said bitterly. "You made him sick, but you're the only one who can slow down the AIDS in him now, so we don't have any choice but giving him back. I wish we did."

"People will be better because of what we've done to him," Howard said.

"Will Matt? He didn't get a choice."

"You had him some little while yourself. Did you let him make all his own choices?" The silence at the other end of the connection answered that for Howard. "You can't with a sim, can you?" the doctor said. "Believe me, I know that."

"Go to hell," the young man said. "I'm breaking off now. You're probably tracking this call." The connection went blank.

"Thank you for giving him back, anyhow," Howard said to the dead line. Then he gathered himself and rang Coleman. He was not surprised to find that the security chief had already given orders for picking up Matt, and for going after the man who called to say where the sim was.

Howard found himself hoping the young man would get away. That did surprise him.

"It's no good, Ken," Melody said. They were sitting side by side at the edge of the hotel bed, but he had known long before she spoke that they



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would not be making love in it tonight. The way she'd sat stiffly, not looking at him, in the passenger seat of the horseless as he drove away after calling the DRC had been plenty to tell him that. Now she went on, "After today, in fact, we'd probably be better off traveling separately."

"Why?" he said. Down deep he knew why, though, and proved it to himself by continuing, "You agreed we had to give Matt back."

"I know I did. It was the only thing we had left to do, and I hate it. I don't see how I'll ever do anything but hate it, either, and being with you just keeps reminding me of it. I'm sorry."

"The rewards of being right," he said.

That earned him a glare. "Call it whatever you like. But if we stay together, I think I'll end up hating you too. I'd sooner break clean now."

"However you like," he said tonelessly. He suspected she would end up hating him anyway, convincing herself that everything that had gone wrong was his fault. It was already too late for him to do anything about that.

He and Melody slept with their backs to each other. The small space of mattress between them might as well have been a chasm.

The IV that slowly dripped into Matt's arm for a while gave him familiar pain. He slept again on a familiar bed in a familiar room. His breakfast came on a familiar tray at a familiar time. After so much strangeness, all that was reassuring.

Aside from the temporary nuisance of the IV, he felt much better. The towers had the medicines to cure the sicknesses he had come down with on his travels, and the special medicine to help keep him from falling sick so easily again.

He had females once more, when he felt well enough for them. That was good, after doing so long without. When the couplings were done, they would ask him in signtalk about his adventures on the outside. He answered as best he could. They were curious, and it helped pass the time.

*Go in cars, like on television,* he would sign, and point to himself. That never failed to draw awed murmurs and excited "*Hoo*'s" from whatever female he was with.

*Better than here. Here everything same all the time,* one of the females signed wistfully.

He shrugged and yawned, baring his large yellow teeth. *After while, going in cars same all the time too,* he answered, full of the ennui of the experienced traveler.

One afternoon, the female called Jane asked, *Why people take you from here?*

*People want to help make sims free,* he signed back. *People want to make* me *free.*



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*"Hoo,"* Jane said softly. *You go outside tower, you free?*

Matt thought that over. No matter how often Ken and Melody had used the word, he still could not quite grasp what they meant by it. *Not sure,* he signed. Then, slowly, he shook his head. *No, not free. People outside like people here. Say they let sims do what sims want, but really only let sims do what sims want when they want that too.*

"Ah," Jane said, and nodded. She understood that perfectly. After a while, they coupled again. Then a nurse came to take Matt away.

*More needles?* he signed. The nurse nodded. He sighed and went with her. The afternoon moved on toward twilight. ●

# NEXT ISSUE

Next month **Walter Jon Williams** takes us sailing on mysterious alien seas on distant alien worlds, in search of elusive and dangerous prey, in our big April cover story, "Surfacing." Anthony Maldalena is a troubled man, but he is also one of the best linguists alive, and searching the unknown seas of a distant planet for a way to make meaningful contact with the enigmatic "Deep Dwellers" has become a consuming obsession for him—one that will soon involve him in a deadly cat-and-mouse game with an alien power, and lead him ever-deeper into an intricate maze of love and danger, betrayal and transcendence... Big, powerful, and compelling, "Surfacing" is probably Williams' best work to date, and I would not be at all surprised to see this one on next year's Nebula and Hugo ballots; don't miss it. From the depths of space, **Charles Sheffield** takes us to some pretty exotic locales right here on Earth, as he takes us along an exciting, evocative, and dangerous expedition in search of "The Courts of Xanadu"—an expedition that finds a great deal more than they've bargained for! **Jack Dann** is also on hand for April, spinning an eloquent and moving tale of affirmation, compassion, and forgiveness in the very face of death, in "Tea."

ALSO IN APRIL: **Pat Murphy,** whose "Rachel in Love" was one of our most popular stories last year, returns with another haunting and bittersweet tale, "Good-bye, Cynthia"; new writer **Rick Wilber** makes his *IAsfm* debut with a razor-edged shocker, "Suffer the Children," sure to be one of the year's most controversial stories; **John Barnes,** whose recently-published first novel was referred to by Orson Scott Card as "the way Heinlein used to do it—one of the best hard-SF novels of the year," returns with a taut and suspenseful look at life and the struggle for freedom in a repressive future society, in "Under the Covenant Stars"; and **Robert Frazier,** one of this magazine's most popular poets, makes his *IAsfm fiction* debut with an elegant and powerful little snapper called "Tags." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our April issue on sale on your newsstands on March 8, 1988.



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(From page 16)

immortal (as witnessed by their interest in life-endangering activities) and in this game they are. Every time your teenager gets bopped, the Bonk Index goes down. When it hits zero, your TFOS is reduced to "standing around and looking stupid." The player sits out one turn before returning to the fray.

The game comes with a pair of dice (each about the size of a dehydrated pea) for rolling up the statistics. Skills are called Knacks, and you allot one to six points (based on a die roll) to Knacks such as Get a Date, Master of Gong Foo, Know about Alien Stuff, etc. All Knacks are tied to a statistic. For example, flying saucer pilot would be connected to your teenager's Driving statistic, and the Knack statistic would be added to the Driving stat before making the appropriate roll for success or failure.

But too much competency in a teenager is an unpleasant thing (not to mention the fact that it's decidedly not cool). If a player's stats or Knacks get too high, a curve factor comes into play. (In this game, mediocrity is a valued attribute.)

Mike Pondsmith gives this example. If your male teenager is overly successful in getting a date with a girl, she might fall madly in love with this teenager, leave icky love notes all over the place, and even announce her undying love over the high school PA. A smart teenager, he explains, never ever lets his/her stats get too high.

Characters can vary from Humans, Near Humans, Not Very Near Humans, or Real Weirdies, and, depending upon the type of alien, the teenager can have a variety of strange abilities, with varying degrees of usefulness. (My favorite is "Telephone"—the ability to contact anyone in the universe at any time in any place merely by thinking about their phone number. The character called hears a tiny ring in his or her ear and a deep voice says, "It's for you." Wrong numbers can be a problem, though.)

The game comes with all sorts of high-tech goodies and gadgets, as well as twenty short sample scenarios for *TFOS* presented as episodes of a TV series. Ideas range from a mysterious rap song that brainwashes everyone, to a visitor clone of your teenager (who turns out to be a total nerd with a Cool of -2).

Not serious stuff by any stroke of the imagination, *Teenagers from Outer Space* makes for very entertaining reading and could prove to be the surprise hit role-playing game of the year.

(By the way, Talsorian offers a newsletter about the game called *Teens & Aliens* or, as they call it, *T&A*. Published irregularly, the current *T&A* offers hints on running games, a sample scenario, and an ad for Liquidate!, an instant date mix.) ●



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# ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

## THE HARD STUFF

Some have identified it with the "nuts and bolts" school. Some have credited John W. Campbell, Jr. with its editorial invention. Some trace its origins back to Jules Verne. Some define it in terms of exemplary practitioners alone—Arthur C. Clarke, Hal Clement, Robert W. Forward, Poul Anderson, Gregory Benford, et al. Benford himself has likened all *other* science fiction to "playing tennis with the net down" and therefore deemed it the form's esthetic core.

I'm talking, of course, about "hard science fiction."

"Hard science fiction" has been generally recognized as a subcategory of the genre about as long as the genre itself has been the subject of its own internal literary criticism, but after all these decades, a "hard definition" of "hard science fiction" remains ironically elusive.

In a sense, it seems to have been generally defined by its dialectical opposition to a changing series of antitheses, and the meaning of the term has mutated accordingly.

Though not precisely in those terms, Jules Verne castigated H. G. Wells for writing less than the "hard stuff," to wit the "scientific romance" which Verne deemed to be his own creation.

During the so-called "Golden Age" of the 1930s and 1940s, "hard science fiction" was identified with what John W. Campbell, Jr. was publishing in *Astounding* as opposed to the interplanetary adventure tales which were the mainstays of "less serious" SF magazines.

In the 1950s, when the center of the field shifted towards *Galaxy* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and a school of SF whose thematic material was drawn from such "soft sciences" as psychology and sociology, "hard science fiction" was generally defined as fiction grounded in the "hard sciences" of physics, astronomy, chemistry, and perhaps with a grudging nod to biology.

During the New Wave period of the 1960s, hard science fiction, rightly or wrongly, came to be identified as the exemplary anti-New Wave SF by the New Wave school and its opposition alike.

In the 1970s, when "science fantasy" came into vogue, hard science fiction was seen as the bastion of pur sang SF against the bastardization of the form.



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And now, in the 1980s, some, primarily and most coherently Gregory Benford, have championed hard science fiction as an antithesis to "cyberpunk," though some of the cyberpunks themselves insist that *they* are writing in the hard SF tradition.

So what *is* hard science fiction? And who is writing it? And are they all writing the same thing? And to what extent is hard science fiction really the esthetic center of science fiction itself?

It is easy enough to dispose of the obvious. Fantasy, whether high fantasy, sword and sorcery, or contemporary, is obviously not hard science fiction. Science fantasy, with its amalgamation of science fiction image systems with the supernatural, with its swordfights in spaceships, with its deliberate disregard of scientific and technological verities in the service of thematic and plotline imperatives, is the opposite pole from hard science fiction to the extent that they are really extremes of the same form at all.

But beyond the obvious, the picture becomes murky indeed. If hard science fiction is defined as SF which operates within the reality constraints of the best currently available scientific worldview, then why is Larry Niven considered a hard SF writer and not J.G. Ballard? Why Arthur C. Clarke but not Frederik Pohl? Why Hal Clement but not Theodore Sturgeon? Why Gregory Benford but not Bruce Sterling? Why Poul Anderson but not William Gibson?

Niven makes free use of faster-than-light travel as a literary convention, as do Clement and Anderson, which is hardly playing the game with the net of Einsteinian relativity firmly erected in the center of the court. Clarke has declared that any sufficiently advanced technology will appear as magic and his best works partake heavily of mystical transcendence. Even Benford has dabbled in a kind of time travel and is as much a transcendentalist as Clarke.

The Ballard of the disaster novels, on the other hand, postulates a single geophysical transformation of the climate and proceeds to its specific effects with considerable scientific rigor. Frederik Pohl's worlds are generally portrayed with lapidary scientific and technological verisimilitude and detail. Sturgeon's works display a formidable grounding in psychology and biology. Gibson brings high technology down to a quotidian and pervasive street level, and Sterling, the main cyberpunk dialectician, places the transformation of humanity *by* science and technology at the thematic heart of his work.

Clearly then, neither scrupulous adherence to the parameters of the current best scientific worldview nor the centrality of science and technology to the lives of the characters and the driving imperatives of the story define "hard science fiction."

Those unsympathetic to hard science fiction have at times opined that, far from being central to the



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genre's esthetic virtue, it may be defined as SF's characteristic literary flaw. Namely, that by placing the focus on scientific speculation and technological extrapolation, the hard science fiction esthetic produces a fiction short on characterization, human feeling, stylistic excellence, and thematic depth.

Indeed, some devotees of the form turn it inside out but are really saying very much the same thing when they declare that science fiction, being a "literature of ideas," is exempt from general literary standards in regard to character development, style, and emotional depth.

Well, this does define a certain kind of hard science fiction. Clement, Forward, Clarke, Niven, and many other generally recognized successful hard science fiction writers are not read for their memorable characters or emotional subtlety or singing prose, but for the fascination of their scientific notions and technological extrapolations.

Which is not to say that such fiction need be subliterate or lacking in narrative tension or emotionally flat. Take *West of Eden* and *Winter in Eden*, the first two volumes of a trilogy by Harry Harrison.

If there is such a thing as hard science fiction at all, surely this is it. Harrison accepts, for the purpose of science fictional argument, the still-controversial theory that an asteroid strike about sixty-five million years ago altered the Earth's climate and caused the extinction of the dinosaurs.

So what would have happened if that asteroid had never hit?

A classical hard science fiction premise, from which Harrison extrapolates and exfoliates his alternate Earth with rigor and care rarely matched.

The dinosaurs survive and continue to evolve, the pinnacle of which evolution being the Yilane, a race of intelligent saurians. The Yilane in turn evolve a high technological culture based on genetics and biology. Boats, submarines, guns, microscopes, medical instruments, even whole cities, are developed by genetically altering living organisms beyond all recognition. For the Yilane have never harnessed fire, they know it only as a natural calamity and a bizarre laboratory phenomenon.

Unlikely as this may seem, Harrison makes it credible. He shows how such a weirdly-skewed technology arises out of the Yilane lifecycle and biology, out of their birth and maturation in the ocean, out of their saurian cold-bloodedness. (These are *not* the warm-blooded dinosaurs of current revisionary vogue.)

Harrison also develops a complicated and variegated Yilane society which also is seen to be squarely rooted in the biological parameters of their being. He develops a Yilane language incorporating gestural signs and with a grammar unlike any human tongue I have ever heard of.


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And he has secured the collaboration of three scientists—a linguist, a biologist, and, apparently, an anthropologist, in the creation of this fully rounded Yilane world. It's difficult indeed to imagine "harder" science fiction than this!

But what of the story?

Here Harrison resorts to a technique at least as old as Hugo Gernsback's "scientifiction formula" and probably as old as Verne—an action adventure plotline to walk us through his world. Here, too, perhaps, he must fudge the science a bit in order for his story to exist.

In Harrison's alternate Earth, North America has been isolated long enough for a mammalian ecosystem to have evolved there, up to and including a homo sapien hunter-gatherer culture and another human culture with early agriculture, plus the humanlike Angurpiaq, basically furry Eskimos.

Since in *our* Earth, the dinosaurs are known to have been dominant before the asteroid strike in North America, too, and since genus homo evolved on the African savannah, and since Harrison shows us no primate progenitors in *his* North America, and since the rest of the science here is so carefully done, it may be safe to assume that Harrison set this up of necessity, and with a sidewise wink.

For what it does is allow him to play human protagonists against Yilane antagonists in a more or less classic action adventure format. An encroaching ice age exerts pressure on the Yilane to seek new territory across the sea in warmer climes. They establish a colony in North America, and the first two books of the trilogy, at least, chronicle the human-Yilane conflict.

But it's not all thud, blunder, and lizard-bashing by cardboard characters. Kerrick, the main hero, is captured by the Yilane as a boy and brought up Yilane under the tutelage of Vainte, an important Yilane leader. Under her patronage, he becomes something of a Yilane Prince, like Moses in Egypt. As with Moses, blood wins out when push comes to shove, and he escapes to become a leader of the humans in their battle to survive against the technologically superior Yilane. Vainte, stung by this betrayal, conceives a vicious vendetta against all humankind, and becomes the champion of anti-human Yilane genocide.

While the story runs tautly along a good guys versus bad guys plotline, there is some characterological depth. There are the Daughters of Life, a Yilane reform movement in conflict with their own culture. And Kerrick himself remains half-Yilane in a certain psychic sense, for he has made some real friends among the saurians, exercised some power there, and at times pines wistfully for the higher Yilane civilization.

The trilogy is only two-thirds done, but it would seem that Harrison is moving towards some kind of eventual detente and even cul-


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tural cross-fertilization between human and Yilane cultures, embodied and epitomized by Kerrick, the man of both worlds. The humans acquire some Yilane technology. Two Yilane males (Yilane society is overwhelmingly female chauvinist) more or less defect to the human side. At the end of *Winter in Eden*, the climactic battle ends not in a one-sided bloodbath but in something of a negotiated settlement.

*West of Eden* and *Winter in Eden* are exemplars of a certain species of hard science fiction. The scientific and technological extrapolation are certainly front and center, the reader is propelled through it by an action-adventure plotline, the prose is straightforward and transparent, and the inner lives of the characters are not really central nor intended to be.

But they *are* real characters, the novels *do* integrate their personal tales into the plot dynamics of the war story, and Harrison *would* seem to be moving towards a thematic climax of some depth and subtlety.

These books are in a sense science fiction as a "literature of ideas," with the extrapolation at the core and the character development at the periphery, but there is a certain balance between them maintained here. This is hard science fiction that knows it is hard science fiction, and if it is not great literary art, that doesn't seem to be what it is trying to be. Harrison's ambitions are extraliterary here. These novels are forthright traditional hard science fiction, but they also demonstrate that hard science fiction does not *have* to be subliterate, that a "literature of ideas" can and should pay some attention to general literary virtues, even if they may properly be subsumed by the ideational content.

On the other hand, *Japan Sinks*, the classic disaster novel by Sakyo Komatsu, like Ballard's disaster novels, reverses the relative balance of scientific speculation and general literary concerns, which may be why neither Ballard's disaster novels nor *Japan Sinks* are generally accepted into the hard science fiction canon, even though Komatsu's scientific speculation, in particular, is quite rigorous.

Komatsu destroys the entire Japanese archipelago in this one via a series of geological events, each one entirely credible, each one flowing out of the other. Komatsu has the geology of all this down cold, and the story unfolds through multiple viewpoint characters, several of them scientists studying the events, as the islands of Japan are broken apart stepwise by a disastrous shifting of the fault in the Japan Trench and the resultant volcanic eruptions and sink into the sea.

*Japan Sinks* is virtually a textbook lesson in how to write this stuff. Geophysics certainly qualifies as a "hard science," and yet this is really no more hard science fiction than Ballard's disaster novels, and for much the same reason.


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Komatsu's central concern here is *not* the scientific speculation but the impingement of the resultant disaster on the lives of his characters, and in particular on how it impinges upon the character of the Japanese people as a whole as seen through them. The Japanese, long isolated from the international mainstream by geography and language, must come to terms with the fact that their ancient and rich culture, so intimately an organic outgrowth of their beloved Home Islands, can now only survive in a geographically rootless diaspora.

When Fujiama itself finally turns on the Japanese in a disastrous eruption, one feels that symbolically at least, the novel has reached its thematic climax, that a great people, shorn irrevocably from the very wellsprings of their culture, from the geographical groundings of shinto itself, must now change radically in order to survive as a refugee nation.

In other words, Komatsu, even more so than Ballard, centers his novel not on the speculative science but on the resultant political, social, psychic, and spiritual consequences. Even though his science is as hard as basalt, it is not the *central* concern of the novel, it is merely the McGuffin, and if *Japan Sinks* is *not* hard science fiction, only this can be the reason why. Reversing Harrison, Komatsu, like Ballard, uses the hard science content primarily to set up an altered psychic landscape and emphasizes the general literary concerns over the scientific speculation.

Yet hard science fiction *can* seek to maintain a careful balance between scientific speculation and the general literary concerns at its core and still remain hard science fiction, or so it would seem from something like Greg Bear's *The Forge of God*.

This is another disaster novel, but on a far grander scale. Alien invaders, apparently from a machine civilization fundamentally inimical to organic life, destroy the Earth, and the means by which Bear has them do so is repellently fascinating in hard science terms, all too credible, and quite original.

Two dense masses, one composed of neutronium, the other of anti-neutronium, are dropped onto our planet. They are so dense that they sink right in and establish decaying orbits *within* the mantle and the core. The anti-neutronium "bullet" interacts with the Earth's matter and its orbit decays more rapidly, so it comes to rest at the center of the planet first. When the neutronium "bullet" reaches it and they are fused together by the pressure at the Earth's core there is an enormous total annihilation reaction and the planet is blown apart from within.

Just for good measure, the aliens drop automated machinery into deep sea trenches which extracts deuterium and/or tritium from the water and/or rock. This releases quantities of hydrogen and oxygen, in the process manufacturing thou-


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sands of hydrogen bombs which are timed to go off as the neutronium and anti-neutronium bullets come together, splitting the crust along its deepest fault-lines and enhancing thereby the efficacy of the internal explosion.

There is much speculation in here as well on the matter of the evolution of life and machine civilizations in the galaxy. The main viewpoint characters, Arthur Gordon, former National Science Adviser, Edwin Shaw, geologist, and Trevor Hicks, scientific journalist, are placed at the heart of the scientific unraveling of the mystery of what is really happening and close to the seat of Presidential power attempting to deal with the situation militarily and politically, as well.

This, of course, is a classic hard science fiction structure. Begin with a series of seemingly isolated scientific mysteries that slowly converge on an outré enormity, building narrative tension as your viewpoint characters become deeply involved in the scientific effort to uncover the truth, then convert the scientific mystery into a problem to be solved by a neat technological fix whose nature you have carefully but not obviously foreshadowed in the previous scientific speculation.

But Bear is after something more literarily ambitious here.

Once the neutronium and anti-neutronium bullets enter the Earth, and they enter fairly early in the novel, the outcome is inevitable. The Earth is doomed, humanity can do nothing to save it, and all the characters move through the story under a sentence of impending death, an impending *species* death, of which the whole world eventually becomes aware.

Which is to say *The Forge of God* approaches tragedy.

Both Shaw and Gordon have a love for the land and through their eyes we see and feel what is to be lost. Gordon has a family from whom he is separated for much of the novel and we get a feel for that, too. Gordon's friend, scientist Harry Feinman, is under his own personal sentence of death from leukemia and dies before the novel is over, nicely mirroring the macrotheme.

Greg Bear makes an earnest attempt to balance a novel of hard science fiction with a novel of character and to unite the two thematically in a tragedy. He seems to be doing all the right things. And yet, somehow, he doesn't quite bring it off.

The characters are real, they have deeply felt emotions, they have networks of friends and family, they care, they suffer, they would seem to fulfill all the standard literary criteria, yet they, and their personal stories, are simply not as *interesting* as the scientific speculation and enormous events. They are intelligent, feeling, but basically rather ordinary people witnessing extraordinary events, and their personal stories seem



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like an overlay on the main event, not a thematic extension thereof.

Then, too, Bear cannot quite bring himself to fully bite the bullet of tragedy. The Earth *is* destroyed, and Bear *does* render its destruction with power and even poetry, but there is a second alien machine civilization at work in the solar system, a literal deus ex machina, which terraforms Mars and Venus and rescues a remnant of humanity, including Arthur Gordon and his family.

Yet if Bear does not quite succeed in marrying hard science fiction to the novel of character in the form of a tragedy, he *does* come close enough to demonstrate that it *can* be done, that hard science fiction *can* rise to the state of literature by any reasonable criterion, that *humanistic hard science fiction* need not be a contradiction in terms. And indeed in a previous hard science fiction novel, *Blood Music*, Bear himself *has* pulled it off.

Nor—despite the general impression that hard science fiction, being the uncompromising core of the SF genre and its enjoyment thereby limited to the sophisticated cognoscenti thereof—is that unlikely hybrid, a hard science fiction *bestseller* aimed at a general audience of science fictional naifs, an inherent impossibility.

Michael Crichton, himself a physician, has made quite a successful career for himself writing just such novels. *The Andromeda Strain* was a hard science fiction thriller about a deadly plague brought back by a satellite and the narrative tension resided almost entirely in the unraveling of the scientific mystery and the scientific attempts to solve the problem, with a bit of physical derring-do thrown in at the climax. *The Terminal Man* concerned control of human behavior via a sophisticated version of the so-called "Del Gado box."

*Sphere*, his latest, begins with the discovery of a huge ancient spaceship, or so it first seems, buried deep on the Southern Pacific seabed. Psychologist Norman Johnson, the viewpoint character, is sent down to a seabed habitat as part of the investigating team. Most of the novel takes place within the deep sea habitat, the crashed spaceship, and the undersea complex between.

As in *The Andromeda Strain*, and to a lesser degree *The Terminal Man*, Crichton has done his homework, and he renders the nuts and bolts of the habitat with accuracy, skill, and verisimilitude. More important, perhaps, for a general audience, he does a fine job of portraying the *psychological* ambience of this constricted technosphere through its effects on characters not at all accustomed to such a venue, as seen through the eyes of a man who is not at home there either but who is a skilled psychologist, an Everyman in terms of the environment, but possessed of special scientific knowledge.

*Sphere* progresses much like a


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traditional hard science fiction novel as the scientific team investigates the mystery of the spaceship, if with more than the usual attention paid to the psychic states of the characters. But the spaceship turns out to be other than it seems, an American spaceship from the *future* rather than an ancient alien visitor, and this is where, just as the story really starts to pick up steam, Crichton begins to abandon the scientific rigor of what has gone before.

His description of the futuristic American spaceship is fascinating and puissant indeed, particularly its cunning use of brand names and familiar quotidian touches in the midst of all the futuristic technology, but as it turns out, it got there by flying through a black hole, and Crichton must justify this by a rather silly explication of wonky relativity theory for the masses which, while it may successfully justify time travel to a general audience, can only be an embarrassment to the scientifically literate.

Which is to say Crichton removes the net from Benford's tennis court in the middle of the match.

From there, the psychological thriller plotline takes over. The mysterious sphere of the title is found inside the spaceship. It turns out to be some kind of artifact snatched from the universe beyond the black hole. It gives anyone who enters the power to actualize imagery from his subconscious. There is a menacing giant squid as well as many other such manifestations.

But before the cognoscenti begin to sneer, let it be said that *Sphere* nevertheless holds up quite nicely as a novel. The narrative tension does not at all slacken when the net is removed and the denouement derives directly from the psyche of the protagonist as manifested through the powers of the sphere in admirable fashion, though to say more would ruin the novel for the reader.

What we have here is something more common than some people would like to imagine—the hard science fiction novel of apparatus. Or more properly, perhaps, the novel of hard *technology*.

The *scientific* speculation is, well, basically bullshit. But the description of the technological artifacts is so realistic and convincing that the *illusion* of scientific verisimilitude is maintained for the reader even while the net of scientific plausibility is torn to shreds in the service of the story.

Nor is this necessarily a bad thing. *This* is in a sense arguably the true esthetic center of science fiction. Every science fiction novel or story which utilizes such standard SF tropes as faster-than-light spaceships, time travel, or parallel worlds partakes of it. *Most* of what we call "hard science fiction" is really "hard technological fiction."

Indeed, it can be argued that if the science is one hundred percent faithful to the best available knowledge, then a piece of fiction


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isn't science fiction at all, since scientific *speculation* is then entirely absent, and what we have is mimetic fiction with futuristic technological trappings.

In other words, most of what we think of as "hard science fiction" is a literary illusion—not a matter of scientific accuracy but of literary technique. As long as the description of the *technology* has the hard-edged plausibility of a Chesley Bonestel painting, we will swallow great gobs of scientific baloney as long as the story holds up, and be convinced that we are reading "hard science fiction" in the bargain.

And why not? All fiction, as Kurt Vonnegut has pointed out, is lies. So why not this one, if we can be made to enjoy it?

Which is not to say that true hardcore hard science fiction cannot exist or cannot rise to the literary heights. Indeed, to be entirely paradoxical about it, one can also argue that the highest form of hard science fiction, that hard science fiction which indeed may be said to be the essence of the genre itself, is fiction which applies all the available literary techniques to preserve the illusion of verisimilitude, while it pushes the edge of the best known scientific worldview just far enough to enter terra incognita without actually *contradicting* known scientific fact, and does this in the service of a story centered on the human heart.

And no one has done this better than Gregory Benford, who indeed plays the game with the net up, but plays it with a net of rubber.

Benford is a working astrophysicist of some repute, but he does not write like the typical scientist dabbling in science fiction.

For instance, his novel *Against Infinity* was rather foolishly attacked for quasi-plagiarism because of its similarities to William Faulkner's story "The Bear," when what Benford was actually doing was rendering literary homage to Faulkner while giving his own novel additional resonance via the time-honored technique of literary reference.

Benford, a native Alabamian, is also interested in a subtle and self-conscious attempt to bring Southern rhythms and speech patterns into his prose, feeling that the voice of most science fiction is perhaps a bit too relentlessly Yankee.

Benford's novel *Timescape* was in part a literary response to C.P. Snow's "two culture problem" down to some of the English settings—a character-centered novel, but a character-centered novel about scientists actually doing science, which admirably portrays the scientific *esthetic*, the scientific *passion*, as no one has really done before. Ironically enough, or perhaps not so ironically, he resorts to a certain amount of rather rubbery science as the McGuffin.

Benford has also traveled widely and spent time in Japan in his youth and some of his stories and notably his novel *The Stars in Shroud* stretch themselves beyond


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Western esthetics and social and psychological patterns to project futures with heavy Eastern influences.

*Artifact* was a straightforward thriller of sorts, but with a hard science McGuffin at the core, and a complex and controversial political subtext exploring the beginnings of the breakup of the NATO alliance.

The point of all this being that Gregory Benford, scientist or not, self-declared hard science fiction purist though he be, is by far the most complete and literarily sophisticated novelist ever to have declared himself a hard science fiction writer. And while he can speculate scientifically with the best of them, the scientific speculation is as often as not *not* his central concern. Nor is he such a purist that he will not bend his science a bit in the service of his other literary concerns.

Which is to say that when Benford the polemicist extolls hard science fiction over the more rubbery stuff, what he really may be championing is nothing more recondite than *good science fiction* over *bad science fiction*, at least to judge from his own best fiction, which is purely and simply the former.

A prime example is his latest, *Great Sky River*, a tenuously thematic sequel to *In the Ocean of Night*, which in turn has a tenuous thematic connection to his collaboration with Gordon Eklund, *If the Stars Are Gods*.

In *If the Stars Are Gods*, mankind has its first contact with extraterrestrials. In *In the Ocean of Night*, humans begin to venture out among the stars in a slower-than-light vehicle—FTL being one of Benford's prime examples of "playing the game with the net down" and something he for the most part eschews even when it would be literarily convenient.

What humans learn to their dismay in *In the Ocean of Night* is that machine civilizations dominate in the Galaxy and, moreover, are engaged in the general extermination of organic sapients.

This theme has gained considerable prominence of late in science fiction (see *The Forge of God*, *Rendezvous with Rama*, et al.) as well as currency in contemporary scientific circles. Most of the galaxy exists at a temperature far more suitable to metalo-silicon lifeforms than frail carbon-based organics, so the theory goes, really advanced machines could be virtually immortal, thereby vitiating the light-speed limitation on interstellar travel, and machine civilizations could last for millions or even billions of years. And sooner or later high organic civilizations will produce self-replicating self-programming machines who will supercede them.

All of this has a hard science plausibility, but the notion that such high machine civilizations would seek to exterminate lower organic forms seems to owe more to the anthropomorphic projection of our own unfortunate xenophobic


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imperialism than to the Cold Equations.

Be that as it may, *Great Sky River* takes a long, long jump-cut from *In the Ocean of Night*, several tens of thousands of years in fact, for Benford simply *will not* resort to FTL no matter how much more difficult his literary problems may be when he eschews it.

Humans, apparently via automated starships with stored germ plasm and/or embryos, have reached the Galactic Center, an area of densely packed stars around the great central black hole, only to find the area dominated by advanced machine civilizations. These civilizations are to the humans as humans are to cockroaches and their attitude toward such bothersome vermin would seem to be rather similar to our own.

The humans build "Chandeliers," cities in space. The machine civilizations treat them like bothersome wasp nests. Humans descend to the planet Snowglade and build great Arcologies. Machine civilization eventually lands on Snowglade, too, and begins the long slow inevitable process of "anti-Terraforming" the planet, cooling it and drying it out to suit machine needs and making it unsuitable to organic forms in the process.

The machines force the humans out of their proud Arcologies. The humans build more modest Citadels. The machines sack the Citadels and finally the last few remaining human tribes are constrained to wander the organically-dying planet in a permanent state of flight and dread.

All of the above, amazingly enough, is back-story, which emerges in bits and pieces throughout *Great Sky River*, which begins with the last humans fleeing across Snowglade and focuses down on a single viewpoint character, Killeen.

On the one hand, this could be seen as a demonstration of the literary constrictions Benford forced on himself by excess scientific scrupulousness. He could only have written the long epic back story as a real-time saga by either hopping cavalierly from character to character down the timeline like Olaf Stapledon and losing all semblance of emotional involvement or by giving us main characters who somehow lived through it all.

And that would have required the acceptance of either immortality or faster-than-light starships.

And that, chez Benford, would be playing the game with the net down.

So Benford kept the net up and accepted the literary consequences, and on the other hand, what he has done in *Great Sky River* is also an example of how adhering to the scientific restrictions can sometimes *enhance* the literary art.

The restrictions Benford placed on himself prevented him from writing *Great Sky River* as a vast parsec-spanning saga of the spaceways. It forced him to focus down on a single small band of humans at the tag end of the story and the


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consciousness of one man and to channel all of his huge thematic material through this lens of emotional reality, to make the novel as much a novel of character as a novel of galactic speculation.

Then, too, really advanced machine civilizations in the centers of their higher flowering would be entirely beyond human comprehension, which is part of Benford's thematic point, and Benford, being human himself, would either have had to reduce their grandeur to sci-fi conventions, or lapsed into babblement, had he attempted to depict Chandelier-humanity confronting their full-blown manifestations.

Instead we have the widowed Killeen, his son, and a small band of humans fleeing and fighting for brute survival at the tag end of the long historical process across the surface of what, from the point of view of the machine civilizations, is a boondock planet. We have the Mantis, a kind of machine artist and curator of organic forms, representing the alien spirit of the machines.

And it works admirably. The human-level story centers on Killeen's relationship with his maturing son Toby, and Shibo, a refugee woman from another band, and it blends nicely with the overstory, which itself enters realms of deep psychic imagery thanks to the powers of the Mantis.

Further, while humanity is portrayed as bands of poor small creatures trying desperately to survive at the margins of machine civilization, as a species that in some ways really *is* inferior, Benford manages to turn *Great Sky River* into something of a celebration of the human spirit under extreme physical and psychic pressure.

He does this in a number of ways. He keeps the story squarely focused on the personal for the most part, making us care for and admire his characters. He gives us everything through the consciousness of Killeen, and renders that consciousness with skill and depth and compassion. He gives us a human culture-on-the-run that still retains a rather touching dignity. Through "Aspects" and "Faces"—avatars of dead humans recorded on chips within Killeen—he frequently evokes the bygone grandeur of humanity's greater days and connects his people with the stream of human history and thereby with ourselves.

He even cunningly connects our remote cyborged descendants with ourselves by very subtly larding their somewhat mutated English with familiar and homey Southern speech patterns.

Finally, he brings in non-material beings existing as magnetic patterns in the accretion disc of the central black hole or perhaps somehow within the event horizon as well whom *the Mantis* regards rather worshipfully as as far above machines as machines are above humans. And he hints at a kind of immortal afterlife for humans in


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this arcane realm of patterned energy.

Here we have Benford the scientific transcendentalist, who seems to be saying that the metalo-silicon matrix need not contain the highest endpoint of the evolution of galactic consciousness. That there may be no such endpoint, no such innate superiority of matrix, that consciousness itself may have a certain independence from the matrix in which it has arisen, that all consciousness is on the same journey. That each matrix of consciousness—flesh, metal, magnetic—contains a spirit which in that ultimate sense is equally valid, equally precious, even though hierarchies of relative physical and intellectual superiority are also quite real, and sometimes tragic.

Alas, he does use these magnetic beings as a kind of deus ex machina to produce a happy ending. The humans are led to an ancient human spaceship, which, with the aid of the Mantis, they renovate, and in which they leave Snowglade for the great unknown, and perhaps a sequel.

This ending is a double-edged sword—psychologically satisfying since we care for Killeen and this remnant of humanity and feel they deserve to survive with dignity, intellectually annoying since it is something of a pat ending that violates the thematic unity of what has gone before.

Still, if we can forgive a certain amount of bending of the laws of science in the service of story as we so often do, perhaps we can also forgive a certain bending of thematic logic in the service of emotional satisfaction.

In a sense, Benford was caught in a bit of a bind. If he followed the cold logic of the tale to its relentless conclusion and had his people fail to survive or be crushed spiritually by the machines, the novel probably would not have had an emotionally satisfying ending. Having chosen to satisfy our hearts, he leaves our intellects somewhat put off.

Benford the humanist and Benford the transcendentalist won out over Benford the hard science fiction writer in a certain sense at the conclusion of *Great Sky River*. And perhaps that is one of the things that makes him the novelist he is.

The strictures of hard science fiction do not define a separate category of fiction exempt from general literary standards and imperatives. Scientific accuracy and technological verisimilitude are *additional* strictures overlaid on those who would wish to write literarily ambitious science fiction. They make such stuff harder to write successfully, not easier, at least for a writer like Benford, who aspires to produce true literature.

Ultimately they are a means, not an end, part of a certain literary equation, not the controlling factor, part of the full spectrum of human literary technique. The best so-called "hard science fiction writers" like Benford know in their heart of hearts that they must give



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and bend a bit in the service of total literary concerns, whether they are willing to admit it in polite company or not.

And *that* is the hard science fiction that is central to the genre. That is the genre's highest form.

Hard science fiction?

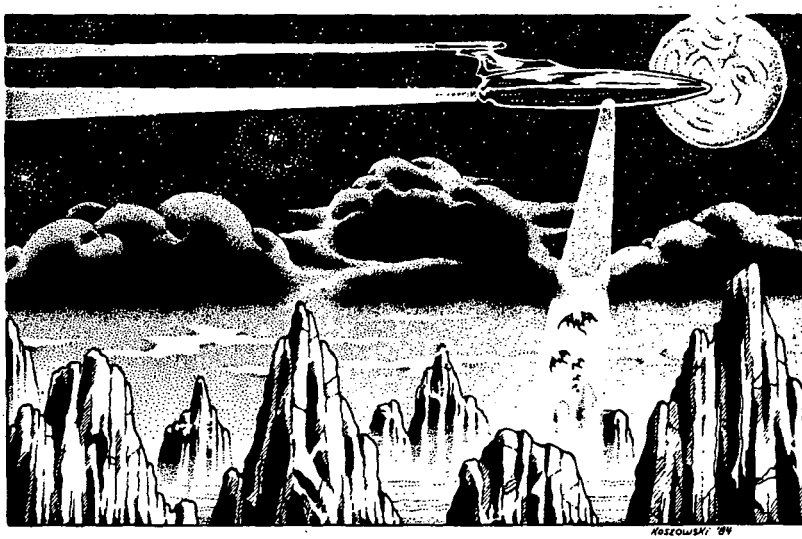
Maybe not. Maybe just *good* science fiction.

All good science fiction must play the game with the net of scientific plausibility up, without eschewing a certain amount of rubbery visionary speculation.

That's what makes it science fiction.

But it must also balance the constraints of scientific *accuracy* against the general parameters of literary excellence and bend them when it must in order to be true to the spirit of the story.

That's what makes it *good* science fiction. ●

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# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Easter is early this year, with its many con(vention)s. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, & a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 823-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's often a good time to phone cons (many numbers are homes). Be polite on the phone. When writing, enclose an SASE. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, with a musical keyboard.

## JANUARY, 1988

29-31—**Boskone.** For info, write: **Box G, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** Or call: **(617) 625-2311** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Springfield MA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Marriott. Guests will include: Greg Bear, artist David Mattingly, editor Ellen Asher. To be limited to about *half 1987's 3,800 members. Advance sellout is possible. Call ahead for latest word.*

## FEBRUARY, 1988

5-8—**OmniCon. (305) 253-7270.** Oceanside Holiday Inn. 3000 Las Olas. Ft. Lauderdale FL. 8th annual.

12-14—**ConTinuity. (205) 956-6121.** Holiday Inn Medical Center. Birmingham AL. Jo Clayton. Webb.

12-14—**EclectiCon, 3630 Kings Way #33, Sacramento CA 95821.** Beverly Garland Hotel. Second annual.

12-14—**CostumeCon.** LeBaron Hotel, San Jose CA. Big annual SF/fantasy/historic costumers' con.

19-21—**SerCon.** Hyatt Regency, Austin TX. SERious & CONstructive. Written SF/fantasy (no media).

19-21—**WisCon, Box 1624, Madison WI 53704. (608) 251-6226.** R. Macavoy, G. Martin, Stu Schiffman.

26-28—**ConTemplation, Box 7242, Colum. MO 65205. (314) 442-8135. 445-9775/4790.** Pournelle.

27-Mar. 1—**ConTact, c/o Stone, 4733 T St., Sacramento CA 95819. (916) 731-8778.** Worldbuilding workshop, rather than a traditional con. Anthropology and SF. Theme: "Cultures of the Imagination."

## MARCH, 1988

4-6—**ConCave, Box 24, Franklin KY 42134. (502) 586-2266.** Park City KY. Lynn Hickman. Relax-a-con.

11-13—**LunaCon, Box 338, New York NY 10150.** Westchester Marriott, Tarrytown NY (no. of NY City).

18-20—**Draconis, Box 162, Concord MA 01742.** Louisville KY. A. (Pern) McCaffrey, singer J. Ecklar.

24-27—**AggieCon, MSC Box J-1, TAMU, College Station TX 77844. (409) 845-1515.** A&M campus.

24-27—**NorwesCon, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 723-2101, 789-0599.** Tacoma WA.

25-27—**Magnum Opus Con, 4315 Pio Nono Ave., Macon GA 31206. (912) 781-6110.** Columbus GA.

## APRIL, 1988

1-3—**BaltiCon, Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203.** *At 2,000 to 3,000 members, the biggest SF non-WorldCon*

## SEPTEMBER, 1988

1-5—**NoLaCon II, 921 Canal #831, New Orleans LA 70112. (504) 525-6008.** WorldCon. $70 in advance.

## AUGUST, 1989

31-Sep. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** Boston MA. WorldCon. Andre Norton.

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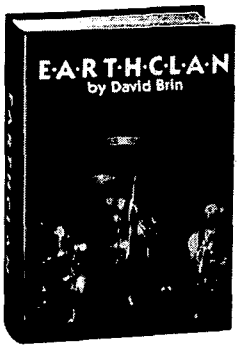

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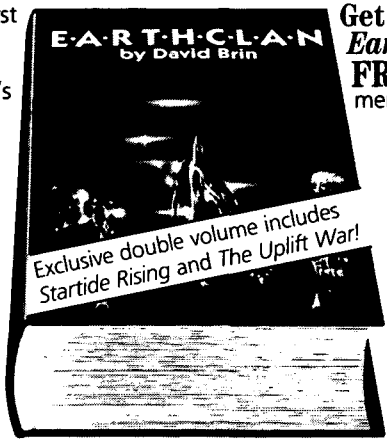


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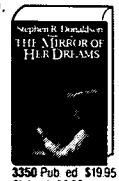


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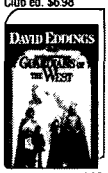


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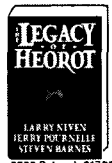


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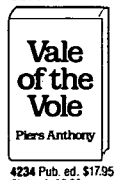


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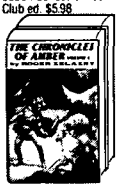


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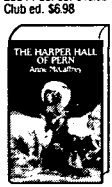


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